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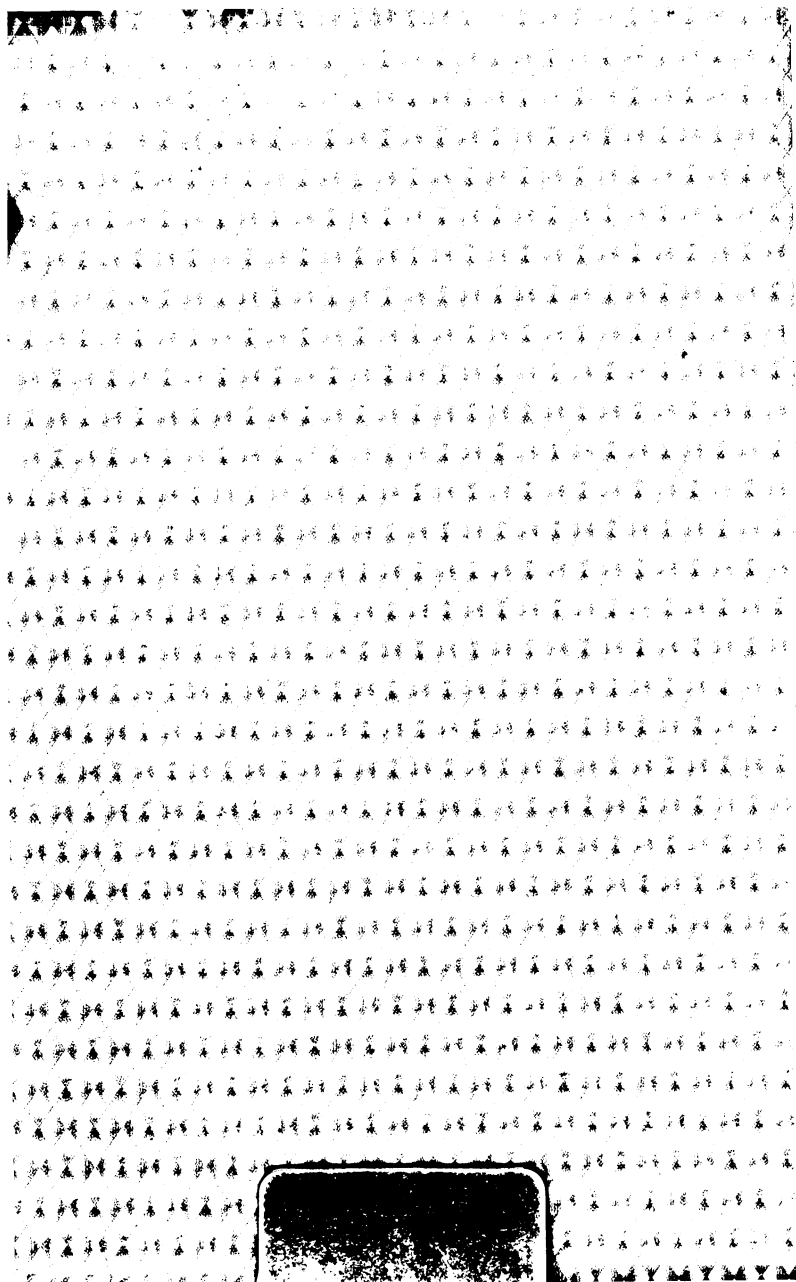
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# QUEEN MAB



LORD JAMES DOUGLAS



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# QUEEN MAB.

A *Nobel*.

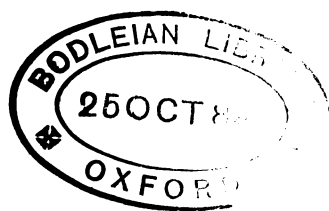
BY  
LORD JAMES DOUGLAS,  
AUTHOR OF 'ROYAL ANGUS.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.  
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**TO**

**MISS MABEL SCOTT (BABS)**

**BY HER SINCERE FRIEND**

**THE AUTHOR.**

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# QUEEN MAB.



## CHAPTER I.



OSTYN HALL, the seat of the Mostyn family, was situated in one of the Midland counties, as famous for its hunting as for its shooting. The Quorn, Cottesmore, and Belvoir packs were all accessible from Mostyn, while the home coverts, though not of great size, held both foxes and pheasants. To Squire Mostyn it would have been a greater annoyance to have had his coverts drawn

blank than to have heard that he had heavily overdrawn his account. And if his friends could not have accounted for their eight hundred head upon his best day by fair shooting, then either the guns or his head - keeper must have been to blame. If the former, nothing was said. But if the latter, none knew better than the keeper himself that his place was not worth a week's purchase.

A large rambling house was Mostyn Hall, old and heavily covered with ivy. Built in the seventeenth century, it had been largely added to until it became a very imposing structure, though somewhat too straggling and irregular to please the exact eye of an architect.

The property, some four thousand acres in extent, yielded a gross rent-roll of about nine thousand a year; and this, as the successive owners had never exhibited very

extravagant tastes, was amply sufficient to keep the old Hall an open house, and to allow the proprietor to indulge in all the country pursuits for which he had an inclination.

The squires of Mostyn had never attempted to vie with their richer neighbours; to maintain a good house, a first-rate stable, and fair shooting had been the height of their ambition. A county contest had indeed cost the present head of the family some seven thousand pounds. But that was many years ago; and being defeated, Lionel Mostyn had cheerfully paid his expenses, but also registered a secret vow to abstain in future from interfering with politics at all. Nor could all the entreaties and arguments of his neighbours move him from this resolve.

‘I gave them the chance once,’ he good humouredly remarked, when severely re-

monstrated with for his apathy by the Lord Lieutenant of the county. 'Faith, and that once, though long ago, was enough for me ! I won't be refused a second time, that I promise you.'

Fifteen years before the opening of our story Lionel Mostyn, by the death of his wife at the birth of his only child, had suffered a shock from which he never recovered.

Not even his dearest friend could get him to talk of his wife. She had been the one woman he prized beyond all the world, and his married life of barely twelve months had been a period of utter happiness and contentment. From the day upon which he had stood, apparently unmoved, by her open grave, Lionel Mostyn had become a changed man.

Old friends noticed that he seemed year after year to grow sterner and more re-

served. To hounds he rode harder than ever, but life seemed to have no interest or joy for him save one ; for his little daughter, the innocent cause of her mother's death, he entertained a feeling almost akin to idolatry. As the child grew old enough she accompanied him everywhere, he grudging even the very few hours which she spent in the schoolroom — where, if the truth be told, she did pretty much as she chose. Her lovely face and coaxing ways made her a general favourite. The farmers and tenantry idolized her, and ever since she had been old enough to ride her tiny Shetland helter-skelter about the surrounding country, she had reigned over them as a queen.

Besides being the future possessor of Mostyn Hall, little Margaret Mostyn was known to be absolute mistress over her father. To secure a favour from the Squire,

nothing further was needed than the kindly word of Miss Margaret ; and knowing this, everyone, from the Rector's wife to the humblest farmer, seemed to have joined in a compact to pet and spoil her. Did the Rector want an odd hundred pounds with which to finish a new schoolhouse, or did a burly farmer require the rabbits on his land to be a trifle fewer, no surer way of obtaining their wishes than through her.

From her imperious ways and regal manner, she had acquired the pet name of Queenie or Queen Mab ; and, except by the servants, she was rarely called anything else.

But Queen Mab, though everyone gave way to her, was far from being haughty or self-willed. The child's nature was too good and honest to be anything but sweet-tempered and kind. Though she had never known what it was to have a whim un-

gratified, or a wish refused, yet the girl's inherent good breeding saved her from being spoiled. And everyone who knew Queen Mab loved her, from the humblest cottager on the Mostyn property to the magnates of the county.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our story opens in glowing July. The great heat of middle day had passed, giving place to the somewhat cooler shades of evening. Mostyn Hall, with its ivy-covered walls and large mullioned windows, was looking its best. The long sloping terrace, which ran the whole length of the southern side of the house, seemed cool and inviting in the extreme when compared with the fiery glow still resting on the neighbouring gardens and the far-stretching park.

It was a glorious country from a sportsman's point of view. Far beyond the park on every side stretched, not golden corn-



fields or hop-gardens, but large stiffly enclosed pastures, the cream of the grass counties—the scene of many a gallant run with the celebrated Cottesmore hounds.

On the southern terrace, engaged in watching the sports of two colleys and a precocious foxhound puppy, stood two figures, as unlike each other in appearance as nature could possibly make them.

The elder of the two was a lady apparently between fifty-five and sixty, with a kind, beautiful face—beautiful even at her age, though no art or colouring adorned, or rather disfigured it. Her hair, plentifully sprinkled with grey, was drawn plainly from her clear intellectual forehead, and neatly coiled behind her head, over which she wore a lace veil which fell to her shoulders. This was Mrs. Desmond, to whom Mr. Mostyn had entrusted the somewhat serious task of educating and

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directing his somewhat wayward Queen Mab.

Mrs. Desmond, a daughter of one of Ireland's oldest though most impoverished families, who had married a penniless subaltern at seventeen and had been left a widow at twenty, was fully equal to the charge—with her, indeed, a labour of love. She treated Queen Mab more as a daughter than a pupil, and well was her affection repaid. Queen Mab, in whom, young though she was, pride of race was very strong, knew that in point of birth Mrs. Desmond was her equal ; and never since the age of ten, when Mrs. Desmond first took the little girl under her charge, had there been a single misunderstanding between them.

Queen Mab, leaning over the grey stone balustrade, seemed wholly absorbed in watching her three canine favourites.

Dressed in a tight-fitting blue silk jersey, white cashmere skirt, and white Carlist cap, the girl made a very pretty picture, as her lovely face lit up with laughter and her eyes danced with fun at the gambols of the three dogs below her.

‘Oh, Mrs. Desmond, do look, dear!’ she exclaimed eagerly, throwing her hair off her face, as she looked laughingly round at her governess. ‘See, the puppy has twice been rolled over—do look at his face! And Hector knows he must not hurt him. What a puppy it is! See, he has caught Moira by the tail!’

‘Does not Mr. Mostyn return this evening, Queenie?’ asked Mrs. Desmond, after duly admiring the bravery of the foxhound puppy. ‘He has stayed away two days longer than you expected, has he not?’

‘Yes; I do not know what has kept him in London,’ slowly replied the girl,

again resting her arms upon the grey balustrade, and looking dreamily over the lovely scene before her. 'He did not tell me in his letter this morning—in fact, he said very little except that I was to meet him at the station. I shall drive the new bays. What a lot I shall have to tell him!' she continued, brightly. 'I wonder if he knows that Lord Darell has returned to Heron Castle at last. I am so glad, the place looked so dismal all closed up—as it has been ever since I can remember, for the late Earl never would live there.'

'Has young Lord Darell really returned?' asked Mrs. Desmond quietly, as the two strolled side by side towards the end of the terrace. 'Who told you, Queenie? I have heard nothing of it. I always believed that he would never be able to live at Heron Castle—the late Earl left him very badly off.'

‘At any rate he *has* returned,’ replied the girl. ‘My maid told me, and her brother is head-gardener at Heron. I wonder what he is like?’ she went on, musingly. ‘I hope he is nice; after all, Heron Castle is the principal place in our county, and if he should not be nice it will be dreadful. His father, according to my old nurse, must have been a species of ogre.’

‘Then you have never seen him?’ inquired Mrs. Desmond, in a low voice. ‘That seems strange, seeing that you and he will be the two largest landowners in the county.’

‘Oh, but I *have* seen him,’ laughed Queenie, as with one bound she cleared the whole flight of steps to the gravel path beneath. ‘But it was when I was quite a child.’

‘What a very long time ago that must have been!’ returned Mrs. Desmond, look-

ing somewhat wistfully into the bright laughing face below her. 'But where was it, Queenie, and when?'

'It was years ago — ages,' answered Queen Mab, in a confidential tone. 'Ten years at least. I was about six, and I suppose he must have been twelve; we met at a children's party at the Boswells'. I remember him quite well, because I danced with him; he danced vilely, and kicked my ankle. I recollect that I cried, and he gave me a box of bonbons, which nurse took away from me.'

'Very interesting! But you can't remember what he was like, I suppose, Queenie?' returned her governess, with an amused look.

'He was dressed in dark blue velvet, I think,' replied Queen Mab thoughtfully, 'and he had a nice face—but I don't remember very much. I know I was very

tired, and cried, and nurse took me away. I have never seen him since.'

'Lord Darell and your father were never great friends,' continued Mrs. Desmond, in a low and rather subdued voice. 'He was the cause, I believe, of Mr. Mostyn not being returned for the county; but that was many years ago—years before you were born.'

'I don't know; but I am sure father was in the right—he always is,' answered the girl eagerly. 'Father never did an unjust action in his life; and if old Lord Darell and he were not friends, it could not have been any fault of his. Nurse says that old Lord Darell was an ogre, and I believe her.'

'He was a great man, though a bad one,' murmured Mrs. Desmond, as if speaking to herself—'ambitious, headstrong, extravagant. He ruined the Darell property, and

others with it. Yet, with all his faults, Lord Darell was by no means an ogre, Queenie. What am I thinking about?' she continued with a forced laugh, as she caught the wondering gaze of her companion fixed full upon her. 'Surely, Queenie, if you are going to meet your father it is time you started. Seven o'clock has struck — the train is due at 7.48.'

'Then let us walk round to the stables,' replied the girl lightly; 'the bays will not take long trotting over. I will take the colleys with me; you won't mind taking the puppy back to the house, will you? And please tell Soames we will have dinner at half-past eight.'

Long after the two fast-trotting bays had whirled the light double dogcart out of sight, Mrs. Desmond still stood listening to the faint rumbling of the wheels, until all sound was hushed by distance. Then,




with a heavy sigh, she turned to quit the stable-yard, and, with her hand still upon the collar of the foxhound puppy, prepared to return to the Hall.

‘And so Lord Darell has returned to Heron Castle!’ she murmured, as she slowly walked up to the southern entrance. ‘What for? Though only a boy—literally a boy of twenty-two—I hear that he is the equal of his father in profligacy. Handsome he is sure to be, no Darell ever was otherwise—winning and smooth-tongued also, or he would not be his father’s son. And he is now at Heron Castle—what for? Though others may be blinded I will not; and, though none save myself may credit it, I know that only the fair acres and big rent-roll of my darling little Queenie could tempt Lord Darell to play the hermit at Heron Castle, when the London season is at its height.’

\* \* \* \*



## CHAPTER II.

OU look tired, father ; and you have never told me what kept you so long in London,' began Queen Mab, when, dinner over, and the Squire's small round table with its bottle of port being wheeled to the side of his armchair, she threw herself down on the bearskin rug at his feet, between two colleys and a huge mastiff.

'Business, my pet ; what else do you suppose would keep me ?' and Mr. Mostyn laughed somewhat awkwardly, avoiding his daughter's eyes while he filled his glass,

and with his disengaged hand fondly stroked the luxuriant tresses of her hair. 'Business, my little Queenie, with which you know I never trouble you. Is it not enough that you should have the whole care of my household without bothering yourself about the estate? I believe, Queenie,' he continued, 'that you would like to interview Mr. Henderson yourself, and take everything off my hands.'

'Of course I should,' replied the girl, as she nestled closer to her father's knee; 'that is, if I could help you. But have you really been in London all this time, father? Your last letter,' she added with a bright laugh, 'was dated Grosvenor Street, but the post-mark was Newmarket.'

'You ought to have been a detective, Queenie!' answered the Squire more cheerfully, after slowly draining and refilling his glass. 'Yes, my child, I was at New-

market. I went down on purpose to buy a two-year-old filly of Dawson's; he wanted two thousand guineas for her—a stiff price, as she has never run, but I have every faith in his judgment. My errand was bootless, however, for Lord Darell had been beforehand with me—he telegraphed from Paris.'

'Lord Darell!' echoed the child, as her large eyes opened in surprise. 'Why, he is here—at least at Heron Castle; he came yesterday, so nurse says.'

'I am very glad to hear it,' returned Mr. Mostyn—'glad on more accounts than one. I should like to know him better than I do—I have seen very little of him. Now, Queenie, suppose you leave off fondling that very ugly colley of yours, and write a letter for me. I should like Darell to come and dine here to-morrow or next day, whichever suits him best.'

'Not now, father,' pleaded the girl. 'I

don't feel inclined to write; I will when I go upstairs, and one of the grooms can take the note over in the morning at exercise. It is really late, nearly ten o'clock.'

'So it is,' returned the Squire. 'Time for you to be going to bed, my little pet. I have plenty to do before I do the same.' Henderson comes to-morrow,' he continued rather wearily, 'and I shall have a great deal of business to get through. Good-night, Queenie; God bless you, my darling! You cannot think how much I have missed you all the week.'

'Not more than I have you,' ruefully replied Queen Mab. 'That horrid Henderson!' she continued with a pout, 'what can he want to-morrow, after all the days he has had you in town? And I had so much to show you! Dolly has had puppies, five such beauties; and I have made the chestnut foal quite tame, and I wanted you so much

to myself to-morrow. You will not be with him all day, will you, father ?’

‘Only in the morning, Queenie. You shall dispose of the afternoon as you like. Good-night, my darling ; come and see me the first thing in the morning as usual—you won’t forget ?’

‘At eight o’clock you can expect us,’ laughingly returned Queen Mab, with her hand on the door-handle—‘myself, Moira, Hector, and also the puppy, father ; he is a new addition to the house since you left. How you will love him !’

‘Humph !’ muttered the Squire, taking several letters from his pocket and laying them carefully on the mantelpiece. ‘That is doubtful, Queenie. But you know you are welcome to bring an elephant into the house if the whim should take you.’

Arriving in her own cosy little bedroom, luxuriously furnished and hung with rose

and white draperies, Queenie threw herself into a huge armchair with a sigh of satisfaction.

‘Send nurse to me, Madeline!’ she exclaimed, after having her hair brushed out and being attired in her little rose-coloured dressing-gown. ‘I want somebody to talk to. Tell nurse I want her at once.’

‘Certainly, miss,’ replied the offended abigail, in a somewhat injured tone; adding to herself, ‘If Miss Margaret wanted some one to talk to, I should have thought I, who have lived in the highest families, could have amused her more than that dratted old woman.’

Queenie’s nurse, being one of the persons her young mistress loved most in the world, was naturally hated by all her fellow-servants. This, however, Mrs. Parsons heeded not a rush. Secure in the attachment of her ‘bonny child,’ as she called her

little mistress, she ruled supreme, even the portly butler treating her with respect. With Madeline, Queenie's maid, she was in a state of perpetual warfare, for, as she expressed it, 'The lass was too high and gallivanting to please her; and as for her dress—well, when *she* was young that was not the way decent servants clothed themselves.' Madeline, on her part, called Mrs. Parsons an old guy, and marvelled how her young lady ever put up with her impudence.

Left alone by her maid, and pending the arrival of her nurse, Queenie bethought herself of her promise to write to Lord Darell; and drawing her chair closer to the table, after some consideration concocted the following note:

'Mostyn Hall.

'DEAR LORD DARELL,

'We have only just heard of your return to Heron Castle, and my father



wishes to know if you would care to come and dine here to-morrow or next day. We dine at eight, and shall be delighted to see you if you can come.

‘Sincerely yours,

‘MARGARET MOSTYN.

‘P. S.—How unkind it was of you to buy that filly of Mr. Dawson’s, when my father had set his heart on her!’

Having read this over twice, Queenie enclosed it in one of her pretty envelopes; and, having addressed it, threw herself back in her chair, and somewhat impatiently awaited the coming of her nurse.

‘I wonder what nurse *will* say?’ she mused, a light laugh rising to her lips. ‘Since I was a baby she has always told me such hobgoblin tales of the late Earl. I wonder if it is true that there are men’s bones in the vaults at Heron, and skeletons

with chains round their waists? What a horrid idea! I could not sleep comfortably over a dungeon. I like my own little rose-curtained bed best!’

‘Madeline only just told me that you wanted me, Miss Margaret,’ began Queenie’s old nurse, as she entered her young mistress’s room. ‘I must say,’ she continued rather irritably, ‘that she has taken her time over delivering her message; but that does not surprise me. Her airs are——’

‘Now, nurse,’ laughingly interrupted Queen Mab, turning to look archly at the old woman’s wrathful face, ‘you know this is what I never permit—not even from you. I do not allow Madeline to talk about you, and I do not allow you to talk about her. I sent for you,’ she continued merrily, ‘because I did not feel inclined to go to bed, and I wanted you to tell me a story. Now, can’t you remember

one? Tell me a ghost-story; something to make my hair stand on end.'

'Indeed, I will do nothing of the kind, Miss Margaret,' answered the old woman. 'It is high time you were in bed, and ghost-stories will only give you a nightmare. Mercy on me!' she continued hastily, her eye falling on the letter addressed to Lord Darell. 'The Earl! Miss Margaret, what can you be writing to his lordship about?'

'That letter? Ah, yes,' returned Queen Mab unconcernedly. 'I forgot to tell Madeline that Jervis or one of the grooms must ride over with that note early, to Heron; they can take it at exercise, and bring back the answer. What are you staring at, nurse?—the envelope will not bite you! What is the matter?'

'Nothing is the matter, Miss Margaret,' almost solemnly answered the old nurse,

taking possession of the letter and placing it in her pocket. 'I will give it to Jervis myself, with your orders. I did not know you knew the Earl—at least, not since he was a little boy. I had charge of you then, and child though he was, I took you away from the ball-room and brought you home as soon as I saw him come and speak to you. That was many years ago, and you may not remember it. Now I can do nothing. But, Miss Margaret,' continued the old woman, in a broken voice, tears rushing to her eyes, 'if by giving my poor old, useless life I could hinder your ever knowing Lord Darell, or any of his race, gladly would I lay it down. When you were born I took you from your poor mother, I have loved you as a mother myself, and brought you up all these years. Miss Queenie, do listen to me! The Darells have always been a race of fiends—oh, I know them,

and well—none better! I tried when you were quite a child to instil a dislike and dread of them in your mind, and now——’

‘Really, nurse,’ broke in Queen Mab, startled by her companion’s vehemence, and rising from her chair—‘really, I cannot allow this. You do not know what you are saying. I wrote that note by my father’s wish, to ask Lord Darell to dinner—just as I write all invitations. How poor Lord Darell can have offended you, I cannot imagine. My father knows him and likes him. That is enough for us. You pretend to be charitable, nurse,’ continued the girl severely. ‘What has this young man got to do with the faults of his father? He is only twenty-two, and for all *you* know he may be one of the best men living.’

‘Then if he is, his reputation sorely wrongs him’ obstinately replied the old

woman. 'A good Earl of Darell!' she continued scornfully. 'When has there ever been one? Earl Francis, Earl George, Earl Walter — father, grandfather, and great-grandfather — aye, and further back still! None; no, not one.'

'Really, nurse, you are absurdly prejudiced,' returned Queen Mab, resuming her chair and amusing herself by playing with her long, luxuriant hair. 'I suppose Lord Darell is much the same as other men of his age and position. Your favourite Sir Ronald Estmere, I have heard, is no saint.'

'Sir Ronald Estmere!' answered the old woman quickly. 'No; and what young man is? But he is good and true. Look how he is beloved by all! And, Miss Margaret,' she continued hesitatingly, 'he likes you, and I thought once you liked him.'

'Did you?' quietly retorted Queen Mab, a rosy flush spreading over her face.

‘Then, nurse, I am afraid you were wrong. And as for his liking me, that again is only your imagination. He certainly never told *me* so.’

‘It is not my place to speak. I have already gone further than I should,’ said Mrs. Parsons sorrowfully. ‘Forgive me, Miss Queenie—your mother’s last words were to bid me love and care for you—and I have—not even your father loves you as I do. But I fear I have forgotten my position. It was *not* my place to speak as I have spoken of my betters.’

‘It is your place to do whatever you choose, dear nurse!’ impulsively cried Queen Mab, rising from her chair and throwing her arms round the old woman’s neck—‘at Mostyn Hall at any rate, so long as I am mistress here. But, nurse,’ she continued gravely, ‘do not be silly—and do not mention Sir Ronald’s name

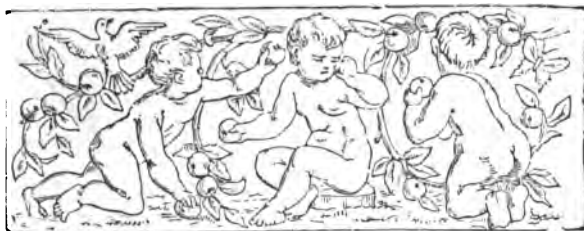
again to me as you did just now. I assure you,' she continued, with a saucy laugh, 'that I care more for my chestnut horse, Blue Ruin, than for any man in the world—except, of course, my father. With you and my father, Blue Ruin and Moira, I could be perfectly happy on a desert island.'

'Yes, Miss Queenie, I know,' slowly replied her nurse. 'But that will not last long. Your father and Moira and I will be secondary considerations very soon. At least I and Moira will. Your father always must command your love and respect—a nobler gentleman never lived.'

'Now I am going to bed,' said Queen Mab. 'Nurse, mind that the letter goes, and tell Holster that I shall want Blue Ruin at twelve o'clock. Father will be engaged all the morning, so I shall go for a ride. Good-night; see that Madeline



calls me at eight. I will breakfast in my own room. Mr. Henderson will be here, and I cannot stand him—besides, father will get over his private business all the quicker. What are you crying about?’ she asked, in a softer voice, as the old woman’s tears fell upon her face when she bent down to kiss her. ‘Don’t be silly, nurse. Do you fancy the goblins from Heron Castle are coming to carry me away?’



### CHAPTER III.



HERON CASTLE, the principal seat of the Darell family, was certainly by far the most imposing structure in the Midland counties. Built on a steep and rocky summit, it commanded a view of almost two entire counties.

In the fifteenth century Heron Castle had been a place of strength, and, if well garrisoned, quite capable of standing a long siege. Of the old feudal towers only the Round Tower, as it was called, and the barbican remained; the rest of the Castle

having been almost entirely rebuilt. But though, with a view to comfort, the proprietors had replaced the old and massive walls and turrets with more modern wings and terraces, still the original architecture had been adhered to as far as possible; and though no longer boasting its once formidable strength, Heron Castle, with its huge round tower and barbican, remained a monument of a bygone age.

The drawing-rooms, billiard-room, library and dining-room covered almost the whole of the ground-floor, the windows of each opening upon the western terrace which ran the entire length of the Castle. From this terrace the lawns and rose-gardens sloped gradually away until they seemed almost to join the park, from which, however, they were separated by a wide and deep moat surrounding the Castle on every side.

Beyond the moat, far as the eye could reach south, east, and west, stretched the heavily timbered park-glades covered with oak, green and copper beech, and gigantic firs, giving it the semblance of a veritable forest. Here, amidst the high ferns and luxuriant vegetation, roamed herds of deer and wild Highland cattle, their rough shaggy coats and huge horns making them look even fiercer than they really were.

But at times these Highlanders could be savage enough, and more than one story was told of luckless villagers and wandering tourists who had been caught and gored by the old bulls of the herd. Still, though dangerous, the old Earl had resolutely refused to sanction their removal. 'If people choose to go wandering about my private park,' he had answered, when urged by his agent to part with the herd,

‘they may take the consequences. Gad! those same bulls are as useful as a dozen keepers to me.’ And in this the old Earl had not been far wrong; few even of the most daring poachers cared about tramping across the home coverts.

In the small breakfast-room of Heron Castle, before a table covered with every luxury which wealth or credit could command, sat Reginald Lord Darell. Breakfast he had evidently finished. With a cigarette between his lips, and lounging comfortably in a huge armchair, which he had drawn close to a wide-open window, he gazed somewhat complacently on the lovely scene before him. Though ten o’clock, the dew still sparkled upon the sloping lawn, and the perfume from hundreds of rose-bushes scented the warm air. All nature seemed alive and joyous, and spoke in the merry

song of the thrush perched amidst the luxuriant rose-trees, and the hoarse deep bellowing of the Highland cattle grazing in the green forest glades far below.

Two letters, which Lord Darell had read, lay on a small table by his side. One of these seemed to annoy him, for, after reading it a second time, a heavy frown crossed his expressive face.

‘Ill-mannered beast!’ he muttered, as he again glanced at the letter. ‘Coming here, is he, by eleven o’clock? Gad! our interview will be short and to the purpose. A couple of hundred years ago I could have locked him safely in the great dungeon; now, I suppose I must listen to him and be polite—ah! that is what hurts me, having even to speak to such a hound as Moses Falcon. This other letter,’ he continued musingly, ‘I will answer in person. I want exercise, so I will ride over to Mostyn

Hall. I remember little Margaret—let me see, Queenie they called her—a pretty child, and might do, for want——’

‘A gentleman called Mr. Falcon, my lord,’ here interrupted the butler, as he noiselessly approached his master’s side and laid a card upon the table. ‘He says he came by appointment. Having no orders, I requested him to remain in the entrance-hall until I learnt your lordship’s pleasure. He drove in a fly from the station.’

‘Send him up, Danvers,’ replied the young Earl; ‘but order his fly to remain—he will not stay long. And, Danvers, tell Grahame to send me round a hack—or stay, I will ride Will-o’-the-Wisp—in about half an hour.’

As the servant withdrew Lord Darell rose from his chair, and with a resolute, almost defiant look upon his frank young face, prepared to meet his coming visitor.

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Though only twenty-two, Lord Darell was as well versed in affairs both of business and pleasure as a man of forty.

Three years of a ceaseless round of gaiety in foreign capitals had given him experience and manners far beyond his age. With women he was an especial favourite; his cool assurance and perhaps his well-known recklessness, together with his handsome face, carried all before him. Somehow, nobody could ever be found who could boast that he or she had got the better of the young Earl. A staunch friend, he was a yet more determined enemy, as many had found to their cost. Everything he did was calculated beforehand; and in desperate straits, where most men would have lost their heads, Lord Darell always managed to keep cool and pass unharmed.

‘Mr. Falcon, my lord,’ quietly announced the butler, throwing open the door of the



breakfast-room and ushering in the celebrated financier. 'Will-o'-the-Wisp is lame, my lord. Mr. Grahame will send round Harlequin.'

'Good-morning, Mr. Falcon,' said the Earl, as, without moving from his position by the open window, he bowed somewhat haughtily to his visitor. 'You are very early. May I ask what time you left London? If you have not taken breakfast let me order it for you now.'

'Thank you, my lord; I have breakfasted,' answered Falcon shortly. 'What I have come about,' he continued, as if wishing at once to get over an unpleasant subject, 'is that loan of thirty thousand pounds advanced to you by our firm. We really are in need of ready money, or your lordship may rest assured we should not trouble you.'

'If you want to talk about money

matters, Mr. Falcon,' quietly answered Lord Darell, lighting a fresh cigarette, from which he blew the smoke in rings into the still and balmy air, 'you should go to Haughton and Fellowes. I never interfere in such matters. I believe your firm receive ten per cent. for the thirty thousand pounds you speak of. The interest has been regularly paid. May I ask why you wish to try to rush me for the amount?'

'Because we want our money, my lord—which is very tight just now. The interest, as your lordship says, has been paid, but *not* regularly. Our firm wish to close the loan.'

'Indeed!' drily returned the Earl. 'Then, Mr. Falcon, your firm, represented, I believe, solely by yourself, should have considered this before parting with the money. I see no way of helping you. Haughton and Fellowes can possibly tell

you more than I can ; for my own part, you might as well ask me for a million as thirty thousand. I have not got it ; and if I had, I have several heavy claims which I should certainly satisfy before yours.'

'Really!' observed Mr. Falcon sarcastically, seating himself in a chair and looking with evident satisfaction on the many rich and rare articles with which the room was filled. 'Your lordship,' he continued blandly, 'perhaps forgets that we can enforce our demand. I have seen enough, as I came through the Castle to this apartment, to make myself easy on the score of our claim. I know something of art. Why, that cabinet in the corridor and that large painting by Sir Joshua are worth fully ten thousand pounds for the two. Heron Castle, my lord, seems to be filled with treasures. Has your lordship ever

considered that we may, and will, levy an execution?’

‘I believe,’ laughed the Earl, ‘that the pictures and different articles you mention are valued at over one hundred thousand pounds. The unfortunate point, however, Mr. Falcon, both for your firm and for myself, can be conveyed in one word—a nasty word, I grant, and one which I wish had never existed. *Entail* is that word. I can no more part with the objects you mention than I can with the family jewels—they, I believe, are valued at considerably over seventy thousand pounds. How sad it is, Mr. Falcon,’ he went on in a bantering tone, ‘to have such wealth in my very hands, and yet be unable to spend it!’

‘But the deed—the deed of security?’ angrily retorted the money-lender. ‘Your lordship gave us, as security for our loan, power over the pictures in Heron Castle.

I have not the document here, it was drawn up in Paris ; but, my lord, if you gave us as security pictures which were not yours, you committed a felony. I know it—I have known——’

‘Don’t get excited, Mr. Falcon,’ said the Earl coolly. ‘The deed you refer to I signed in Paris. I also read it carefully over. I explained to your man of business that some pictures here I had no power to give as security—and at my request the wording of the deed was altered. Instead of “the pictures at Castle Heron,” it was changed to “those pictures not entailed, to the amount of our loan.” That, I believe, was the wording—I am not certain, for I have not a copy by me. You are at perfect liberty to seize those pictures—I don’t believe they are worth more than four thousand pounds at the utmost—though, if you take my advice you will not do so.

Your ten per cent. will be paid half-yearly as regularly as it can be, but if you trouble me further I shall instruct Haughton and Fellowes to stop even that. Of course you can then make a seizure. How the world will laugh,' continued the Earl, with a smile, 'when they hear that Mr. Moses Falcon has been obliged to take pictures worth four thousand pounds for hard cash advanced to the extent of thirty thousand!'

'I do not believe it!' furiously exclaimed the irate Jew. 'Your lordship does this to put me off. I will send for the deed and satisfy myself, and if——'

'That will do,' said the Earl sternly, with an evil gleam in his eyes. 'I have an engagement. My horse is, or should be, at the door, and I am not ready. I will wish you good-morning, Mr. Falcon. Danvers,' he continued, as the butler an-

swered the bell, 'show this gentleman out. If he needs any refreshment serve it to him in the steward's room.' And without waiting to notice the effect of his last remark, Lord Darell, whistling a new and popular waltz, instantly left the room.

Savagely muttering to himself, and giving vent to his rage in half-audible oaths, Mr. Falcon followed his guide through the great entrance-hall. But low though his ejaculations were, most of them reached the keen ear of Mr. Danvers, who, after politely delivering him into the hands of two footmen, stood watching his departure from the top flight of steps.

'If you never met your equal in sharpness before,' he exclaimed, as he looked after the retreating fly—'by the powers but you will find my lord a little too sharp for the whole of you! Man and boy,' he continued contemplatively, 'I've known

the Earl sixteen years. What this new game is of coming to Heron in the London season beats me. One thing is certain, the life don't suit me—nor him either, I should imagine, after a week.'

Lord Darell's face wore a peculiarly self-satisfied expression while he jogged slowly along the broad, sweeping avenue which led to the western entrance. The morning was lovely, and all nature looked bright and beautiful in the extreme. He felt pleased with himself and all the world. He even tried to persuade himself that a country life was what he was intended for; at any rate for a time. As he turned in his saddle and critically surveyed the huge grey pile which belonged to him, and the vast stretching park with its green secluded glades, a thrill of pride shot through his heart. Why should he, the owner of such a princely inheritance, spend his days in



the hot, stifling hotels of foreign capitals? For a moment he almost regretted the last few years of his life. But then again, the thought flashed across him of his total inability in his crippled position to live at Heron in the style that he desired. It could not be thought of, unless he were to sacrifice himself and his freedom for the sake of a woman's gold. The idea was not pleasant; Lord Darell loved his freedom, loved his own way, and above all loved himself. Petted and spoiled by woman-kind, up to the present time he had never met anyone who had inspired him with the smallest feeling of love. On the other hand, he had never experienced a rebuff. Because they knew and felt that he was unattainable and indifferent, women had always fawned on him and spoiled him. Many had loved him, and he, for the amusement of the hour, had pretended to

return their affection. As is always the case, the woman had come off second best, and Lord Darell, growing bored, had speedily found some one else to fool to the top of her bent. Altogether his reputation was none of the best. Men knew him to be utterly unscrupulous, and women found to their cost that though generous and open-handed, he was as heartless as he was plausible. Still, he was a general favourite: lavish to a fault, a pleasant companion, young, and undeniably handsome, how could he fail to be otherwise in our world of society, where nothing is required from a man save position, wealth, and good looks? The complaints of those whom the young Earl had made his victims were treated with contempt.

‘Of course, very shocking, my dear!’ Lady Sneerwell would say to her intimate acquaintance, Mrs. Mantrap; ‘but, of

course, all *her* fault. Really, quite old enough to be poor Lord Darell's mother. Charming young man; such a beautiful place! I shall certainly ask him to my next ball.'

It seems very extraordinary, but it is nevertheless true, that if a man gets into a scrape his fellow-men invariably stick to him; but should a woman take a false step, all womankind swoop down on her like vultures, and seem to exult in magnifying her fault a hundredfold.

'I don't suppose I should make a good husband,' mused the young Earl, as, after reviewing his past life, his thoughts returned to the present; 'at least not to anyone I have ever seen. And yet I suppose I ought to marry. Margaret Mostyn will be very rich, and our properties join—Queenie, they called her. I wonder what she is like? She was a pretty child years

ago. Well, I will see! Really, if it was not absurd,' he continued, as he reined up his horse, 'I should say that I had lost my way. The country looks different in the summer; and last time I saw this road was in a snowstorm, when I was only twelve years old. However, here comes some one on horseback—a lady, too, and alone. I suppose they are all Amazons in the shires. I wonder if she will faint if I ask her the way to Mostyn?'

'Mostyn Hall!' exclaimed Queenie, for she it was, as she pulled up her neat thoroughbred chestnut to answer the Earl's inquiry. 'Oh! you have come a mile out of your road. You should have kept on by the mill-side. Is your horse a good fencer?' she asked doubtfully. 'If so, you can take a short cut over that grass-field. There is a small post and rail at the bottom, and afterwards a boggy brook. I came

that way; but the grass is long, and, unless you are on a hunter, very blind. But what are you going to Mostyn for ?

‘ Well, I am going to see Mr. Mostyn,’ answered the Earl, in a rather surprised tone. ‘ I ought to know my way—but, as you see, I do not. My horse has won more than one steeplechase, and I dare say can manage the obstacles you mention. My name is Darell. I——’

‘ The last time I saw you,’ laughingly interrupted Queen Mab, ‘ you were in blue velvet knickerbockers and a jacket; forgive me for laughing, but I cannot help it. My name is Margaret Mostyn. You are coming to dine with us, I hope?’

‘ And so you are Queenie?’ questioned the young Earl, as they shook hands. ‘ Forgive my calling you by your pet name,’ he added in a soft voice, which before now had thrilled the heart of more than one

woman, but at which Queen Mab only laughed. 'Indeed, I can remember you by no other.'

'Queenie is what everyone calls me,' she returned brightly, 'or Queen Mab ; I prefer the latter. If your horse can jump I will take you to Mostyn the way I came ; but don't ride ahead of me, or Blue Ruin will bolt.'

'Do you call this a small post and rail?' grimly asked Lord Darell, as, after cantering across the grass enclosure he saw a big upstanding four-foot-seven rail of solid oak, cramped with iron, strong enough to bear the rush of a drove of cattle, and an ugly dip amidst long grass on the take-off side. 'I have seen a much smaller place turn twenty out of thirty men in the field.'

Without deigning a reply Queen Mab sent Blue Ruin slowly at the somewhat

awkward place ; and clever as a cat, measuring his distance at every stride, the bonny chestnut landed upon the opposite side with no more ado than if it had been a common hurdle.

Turning in her saddle, Queen Mab watched, not without a small amount of anxiety, the movements of her companion's horse. Very fresh, and quite unaccustomed to being 'larked,' Harlequin, with his mettle up, rushed at the forbidding-looking bit of timber at a truly awful pace. A consummate horseman, Lord Darell felt that a fall was inevitable. With all his skill he tried to pull his horse into his stride, but finding this to be impossible, not two yards from the ugly dip he dropped his hands ; and Harlequin, jumping wildly, hit the rail all round, blundered on his head, then on his knees, slithered forward, and then regained his legs.

‘You *can* ride,’ involuntarily broke from Queen Mab’s lips, as she witnessed the cool, collected manner in which the Earl had handled his horse. ‘Not one man out of fifty could have saved a fall ; it was splendidly done.’

‘Harlequin has been over the Liverpool course,’ quietly returned the young Earl ; ‘but he is fresh, and has not been jumped for six months. He won’t make a mistake at the brook, Queenie, boggy though you say it is ; he is the best water-jumper I ever rode.’

‘I am afraid you will find it very dull to-night, Lord Darell,’ began Queen Mab, as, after safely negotiating the boggy brook, they turned on to the high-road. ‘Sir Ronald Estmere is coming, and Mr. and Mrs. Halston—Sir Ronald joins you on the south side, as we do on the western side of Heron. He complains that your coverts



take all his pheasants. But see, here we are. Shall we ride into the stables? My father is sure to be there, and he is so anxious to renew his acquaintance with you.'

'Delighted, I am sure, to renew mine,' somewhat hurriedly replied the Earl. 'What a lovely face, and what a charming manner this girl has!' he thought, as he followed her. 'I shall not be so dull at Heron as I imagined. She will be very good company for a time, and then—well then, I suppose, matters will take their course.'

The Squire's approach put a somewhat abrupt termination to Lord Darell's meditations. It was not in Mr. Mostyn's nature to bear ill-will to anyone, and though he had heard—as who had not?—of the wild and reckless life of the man before him, still he welcomed Lord Darell as though nothing had ever been whispered against him.

‘His mother died when he was a baby,’ the old Squire had argued with himself, ‘and his father—well, the late Lord Darell was hardly a man who would bring up any boy properly. They say this young fellow has committed every vice under the sun. Women, I dare swear, did their utmost to attract him, and then turned upon him. They must have been a bad lot, or he would never have gone so far as the world says he has.’

Men always argue in this manner. So had argued many husbands and fathers when Lord Darell first entered their houses, to find out, when too late, that the wiles and glamour which had destroyed the peace of other homes, became shortly as dangerous in their own.

‘It is of no use for you to return to Heron to-night, Lord Darell,’ said Mr. Mostyn warmly. ‘I will send a dogcart for your

servant and things, and you can sleep here. You are a judge of a horse, and I wish to show you some yearlings—don't say no. I fancy I have one yearling which you will admire, and which, if I am not mistaken, will prove as good or better than the two-year-old of Dawson's you were beforehand with me in buying.'


'Yes, do stay,' urged Queenie, as she saw the young Earl glance towards her. 'I have got to scold you yet about that two-year-old. We wanted her, and you bought the filly.'

'I bought her, not knowing that you wanted her, Queenie,' softly returned Lord Darell. 'I think she will be the best three-year-old of her day. She is engaged in the One Thousand, Two Thousand Guineas, Oaks, and Leger. I have not named her, but I think she will not disgrace the best name I can give her. May I call her "Queen Mab"?''

‘Yes, if you like,’ hastily answered the girl. ‘But I think you could have found a better name, and a luckier one. Do you know,’ she continued, with a laugh, ‘I am always fearfully unlucky.’



## CHAPTER IV.

‘ HE has been spoilt all her life ;  
what else can you expect,  
Ronald ?’ almost angrily asked  
Lady Estmere, neatly folding a tiny flannel  
garment which she was making for one of  
her numerous school-children, laying down  
her work and looking at her son, who stood  
opposite to her.

‘ And I must say,’ she continued firmly,  
‘ that since she was little more than a baby  
you have spoiled her also. It is of no use  
to deny it,’ went on the old lady, as she  
saw her son about to speak. ‘ You have

done so ; I should not say so if you had not.'

'I was only going to remark, mother,' good-naturedly interposed Sir Ronald, 'that no one had spoiled Queenie more than yourself. I remember——'

'You can remember what you like, Ronald,' indignantly rejoined the old lady, 'but your memory must be better than mine if you can recollect any instance in which I have spoiled Miss Mostyn ; I have invariably tried to check her forwardness. Only last week I hinted to her that the way she flirted with Lord Darell was the talk of the county. I considered it my duty to speak to her, seeing that you intend honouring her by making her your wife.'

Sir Ronald Estmere, who was leaning against the open window of his mother's boudoir, and gazing absently on the green woods and fields before him, gave an in-

voluntary start. About twenty-five, tall and well made, it would have been hard to find a more perfect type of a thorough Englishman. Strangers sometimes fancied that his dark blue eyes and long eyelashes gave him a rather effeminate appearance, but those who knew him could vouch that a more daring and skilful horseman never rode the grass country, a more fearless, truthful, honest man did not exist in England. Proprietor of one of the largest estates in Warwickshire, he possessed property also in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, and to no worthier hands could such a great trust have been confided. A harsh or mean action he was incapable of; his vast estates he managed with the most perfect justice and firmness. The smallest cottager upon his estates he regarded in the same light as his most influential tenant, and if ever a rumour of hardship or op-

pression reached his ears, it was instantly rectified.

‘Mother,’ he said, in a somewhat pained tone, as Lady Estmere, after having given her opinion of Queenie, returned with renewed ardour to her work — ‘Mother, I wish you would not interfere with Queenie. Believe me, you do more harm than good. Don’t think, mother dearest,’ he continued kindly, as he noticed the surprised and almost haughty look which crossed Lady Estmere’s face, ‘that I mean to blame you—but, indeed you misunderstand Queen Mab. She is so young, and, as you say, has been rather spoiled. At her age, mother,’ he added, with a smile, ‘perhaps you flirted as much as she does. She means no harm, and indeed——’

‘I would never have believed you could say such a thing!’ wrathfully exclaimed the



old lady. 'In my days, Ronald, young girls were not allowed to go gadding about the country alone, and flirting with every *roué* they met. Yes, and Lord Darell is little better than what I have said—his reputation is European! How Mr. Mostyn can be so mad as to tolerate him at his house is beyond my comprehension. I *will* speak, Ronald,' she went on. 'That man, young as he is, has no business in any decent house in England. When he was but seventeen Mary Craig drowned herself in the Midland Canal. What for? It was hushed up; but her mother came to me, and in her mad grief told me what the world never knew. Ronald, it is at Lord Darell's door that her death lies—the man is no better than a murderer; and if ever he dare put his foot inside this house I will tax him with it, even though Margaret Mostyn should stand by his side!'

‘My darling mother,’ said Sir Ronald tenderly, as he noticed the excited state into which Lady Estmere had wrought herself, ‘none know better than I that what you say is true; but remember, Queenie knows nothing of all this. How should she? So far as Mr. Mostyn is concerned I am as surprised as you can be. Perhaps,’ he went on generously, ‘remembering that Darell’s mother died when he was a baby, and what his father was, he may wish to give him a chance. Think, mother,’ he continued earnestly, ‘what I might perhaps have been, had I lost you when I was young, and not had your care and love to guide me as a boy!’

‘You would never have become what Lord Darell is, Ronald,’ answered his mother more softly. ‘*He* pretend to be fond of Margaret Mostyn! More fond of her money and estates, I imagine! I

should like to see her a beggar to-morrow, and with all his pretended devotion I would give Lord Darell but twenty hours before he was in London or Paris.'

'And if she were to become a beggar, which is impossible,' slowly replied Sir Ronald, 'I would still love her as much, still think myself the happiest and most honoured man in England if she would be my wife.'

'Yes ; but your ideas and Lord Darell's are, I must thank God, very unlike,' quietly returned Lady Estmere. 'Girls of Queenie's age admire men of Lord Darell's stamp more than men of yours. Afterwards they find their mistake, and end in wretchedness or the Divorce Court. But it is of no use for me to say anything more, Ronald. I know it is impossible to put old heads on young shoulders. You said you were going to ride over to Mostyn

Hall; if so, you had better start. I shall not expect you back to dinner. But remember, what I tell you is true. Queenie is nothing but a flirt, and an outrageous one; waste your love on her and you will repent it. With girls like her, the glitter of a man like Lord Darell will weigh more than the gift of your entire heart.'

'You must excuse me, mother, if I do not agree with you,' replied her son almost coldly, as he prepared to leave the room. 'I do not think you understand Queenie. I think and hope I know her better than you do.'

'For your sake I trust I may be mistaken,' answered Lady Estmere. 'If you take my advice, Ronald, you will point out to Mr. Mostyn the error he is committing in allowing Lord Darell to be perpetually at the Hall. I should not speak to Queenie on the subject. She is an ignorant

child, and would probably misunderstand you.'

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'It certainly is fearfully hot!' cried Queenie, who was sitting on a bearskin rug under the shade of the great copper-beech, which stood at the extremity of the lawn. She looked flushed, and decidedly cross. 'How provokingly cool you look!' she went on pettishly, addressing Mrs. Desmond; 'while I am melting—and oh, so dull! It is too hot to ride or drive, too hot to walk, too hot I think to do anything but lose one's temper.'

'I think it is a charming day,' placidly returned Mrs. Desmond, leaning back in her chair and calmly going on with her knitting. 'If you would sit still, Queenie, instead of tossing about, you would feel cooler.'

'I dare say,' peevishly retorted Queen

Mab, as she made a vicious attempt to catch a wasp which buzzed round her head. 'But the flies worry me more than they do a horse. How can I sit still? Father has gone again to London, and I'm lost without him. He seems always to be in London now; what for I cannot make out—he never used to go. I asked Lord Darell,' she added more gravely, looking up into her governess's face, 'if he could tell me why; and he laughed, and said that perhaps father meant to give me a second mother.'

'Lord Darell had no right to say such a thing, Queenie,' returned Mrs. Desmond, a hot indignant flush passing over her pale face. 'If he knew your father's past life as I do, and how devoted he was to your dead mother, such a thought would never have entered his head. I must say,' she continued haughtily, 'that it was a foolish

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idea even for him. I dislike the man, but I never could have believed he would have made such a suggestion to you even in jest.'

'I know you dislike Lord Darell,' answered Queenie more quietly, and resting her flushed face in her two little hands. 'But I do not. Please remember he is a friend of mine. I have never abused a friend of yours, and why should you always make a point of running down Lord Darell? If you think it makes *me* dislike him you are mistaken. It makes me like him ten times more.'

'Then you must have your own way, Queenie,' replied Mrs. Desmond. 'It really is no affair of mine—except,' she went on sadly, 'that I love you very dearly, and from experience, aye, and from sad experience, know well what Lord Darell is. But let us change the subject. Did

not Sir Ronald Estmere say he would be here this afternoon ?’

‘ There must be some great attraction if he comes,’ laughingly answered the girl. ‘ No man in his senses would ride fifteen miles in this tropical heat without a strong inducement. I trust I am not the attraction. Sir Ronald bores me to death ; now Lord Darell——’

‘ For Heaven’s sake, Queenie,’ passionately interrupted Mrs. Desmond, throwing down her work, and fixing an anxious gaze on her young companion, ‘ leave that man’s name alone, or at any rate do not couple it with that of anyone so good and honest as Sir Ronald Estmere. Lord Darell !’ she went on scornfully. ‘ Queenie, young though you are, I *will* tell you—it is my duty to do so—that man has entered no home that he has not made miserable. He is a spendthrift, a gambler, a duellist,



and an outcast. Worse, he is a dishonoured coward. You may not know it, but I do. A year ago he took away from her happy home, and devoted lover, Miss Mortlake—a tradesman's daughter—yes, only a tradesman's child. In four months he cast her off. She is alive now, but in a madhouse. Her lover challenged him; in his fury and despair he knew not what he did; Lord Darell accepted his challenge and shot him through the heart. Men may call it what they like, but I say it was murder. The young Earl is one of the best pistol-shots in Europe, and his adversary had never handled a hair-trigger in his life.'

'I don't believe it!' indignantly replied Queen Mab, springing from the ground, and drawing herself up to her full height. 'You have been misinformed, Mrs. Desmond. Only two nights ago Lord Darell told me that perhaps I should hear many

hard things of him, but if I did I was not to believe them. I do not, and never will. My father *must* know. Do you suppose that if what you say is true he would tolerate Lord Darell in his house?

‘Here comes Sir Ronald Estmere,’ replied Mrs. Desmond. ‘He is a man of the world, truthful, honest, and a gentleman. Ask him, my child, what Lord Darell’s character is ; and if he tells you, believe me he will err rather on the side of mercy than censure.’

‘It is too bad,’ soliloquized the girl, watching her governess’s retreating form, and then moving slowly across the lawn to meet Sir Ronald. ‘Everyone, from nurse to Mrs. Desmond, hates Lord Darell. I believe it is only jealousy, because they know that I like him. I do not think Ronald Estmere would tell me a falsehood. I *will* ask him about Lord Darell ; but I

know beforehand that *he* will say nothing ill of him.'

'Well, Queenie, hot as it is I have kept my word!' cheerfully exclaimed Sir Ronald Estmere, giving his horse to a groom, and crossing the lawn. 'What is the matter? You look more angry than I ever saw you. What is up?'

'Nothing—no, I mean *everything!*' sharply returned Queen Mab. 'Ronald, is it too hot for you to walk as far as the paddocks? I want to talk to you; and I want to show you the new pair of chestnuts Lord Darell gave me.'

'Lord Darell!' exclaimed Sir Ronald, in a tone of utter surprise. 'Queenie, what are you saying? How could Darell give——'

But here the young Baronet brought himself to an abrupt conclusion. Only two days before Lord Darell had posted in hot

haste to Estmere Grange, and had borrowed some two thousand pounds from him, giving at the same time an I O U for the amount, which after his departure Sir Ronald, knowing that it was valueless, had secretly burnt.

‘I suppose his present to Queenie was paid for out of my money,’ he thought to himself. ‘Well, what matter, so long as it pleased her? but if I had known she wanted a pair, I would have given her my prize greys.’

‘I wish,’ cried Queen Mab petulantly, ‘that you would not begin a sentence and not finish it. What were you going to say?’

‘Nothing,’ briefly replied Sir Ronald, cutting viciously at several huge sun-flowers with his hunting-crop. ‘Nothing, Queenie. Go on, and tell me what you said you wished to talk to me about.’

‘You are all alike,’ continued the girl impatiently. ‘Whenever I mention Lord Darell’s name it seems like a red flag waved before a bull. Why should not he give me a pair of horses? what is there extraordinary in it? I suppose, Ronald, you are silent because, like the rest, you dare not speak.’

‘Dare not speak!’ angrily repeated the young Baronet. ‘That is a strange expression to use to me, Queenie! I thought you knew me better. Dare not!’ he went on, with a haughty smile, ‘say rather I do not choose. I was surprised that Lord Darell had given you a pair of chestnuts. Your own good sense must tell you that he is totally unable to afford such presents. Let us change the subject; I hate talking about other men’s private affairs.’

For a moment Queen Mab was awed into silence. It was not often that anyone or

anything frightened her, but there was a look in the face of her companion which, long as she had known him and often as they had quarrelled, she had never seen before. A look of utter disdain, a glance of such supreme contempt, that for an instant the girl recoiled from his side.

‘Ronald,’ she whispered softly, ‘you are not angry with me? I wanted to consult you. I have no one else to whom I can speak ; my father would not understand—and besides, he is away. Ronald, you promised always to be kind and gentle to me. Don’t you remember years ago, when I was only a child, that you promised to be a brother to me?’

‘Forgive me, Queenie! I was a brute,’ said Sir Ronald in a gentler tone, as, halting under the shade of a huge copper-beech, he took both his companion’s hands in his, and drew her towards him. ‘Queenie, I

came here to-day to ask you a question. It cannot be one for which you are quite unprepared, so I will not beat about the bush. Though very young, you are old enough to know your own mind. Will you marry me, Queenie—yes or no?’

‘Marry you, Ronald!’ repeated the girl, in a tone of utter amazement. ‘What are you talking about? Why, I always thought you were to be my brother. Don’t try to deceive yourself, Ronald,’ she continued more gravely, as she noticed the pained look which crossed her companion’s face. ‘You know that you only really care for me as you would for a sister. And I—well, I like you *very, very* much; but as for marrying you, I would as soon think of——’

‘That will do, Queenie,’ hoarsely interrupted the other. ‘I cannot urge any hope of mine against your inclination. But I must ask another question—I have a right

to ask it, and I am sure you will not refuse to answer me. Do you care for anyone else?’

‘I don’t know—I cannot say,’ replied Queen Mab slowly. ‘And I do not really see that you have any “right” to inquire. It does not make any difference in my answer to you.’

‘I understand you, Queenie. I suppose it is Lord Darell?’ resumed Sir Ronald, with quiet sadness.

The crimson flush which dyed Queen Mab’s face was at first her only answer. Then she said :

‘Yes ; Lord Darell, since you have guessed our secret. He loves me and I love him. What have you to say against him, Sir Ronald?’ she continued haughtily, as her companion smiled in utter derision.

‘Nothing,’ sadly replied the young Baronet, as he turned upon his heel.



‘Good-bye, Queenie; I shall not see you again. Perhaps you may not believe me, but indeed I bear Lord Darell no enmity, yourself no ill-will. I only pray God that your choice may prove a happy one, and that Lord Darell will love and cherish you as I would have done.’

‘Ronald, don’t go away like this,’ softly pleaded Queen Mab, laying her hand upon his arm. ‘You have always been so good and kind to me. Tell me I have not made you unhappy. I should be wretched if I thought so. You don’t really care for me, do you? Your passing fancy will soon leave you.’

‘How can you talk such nonsense?’ indignantly returned Sir Ronald, his face expressing the tumult of his feelings, as he turned and confronted his companion. ‘Mine a fleeting fancy! Rather say that Lord Darell’s is but a fleeting

**f**ancy. Three months ago he was in Paris, and the devoted slave of Lady Highworth, as all the world knows. While I—God **k**nows I have loved you since you were **a** mere child. Time will prove who loves **y**ou best. I will say nothing against your **l**over; but I sincerely trust that he may **p**rove truer to you than he has to others. **G**ood-bye, Queenie,' he continued more **t**enderly. 'Let me hear from you some-  
**t**imes, will you not?'

'Ronald! please do not leave me like **t**his,' again pleaded Queen Mab, her whole **p**ride breaking down as she looked into the **w**hite and miserable face of her companion. 'You have been always so kind and good to me! I thought you loved me as a **s**ister; indeed, I never dreamed of anything **e**lse. Don't you remember how you used to spoil and pet me when I was quite a **l**it**t**le child?'

‘Don’t recall those old days to my memory,’ replied the young Baronet. ‘My darling, I remember them only too well. When we were both children my whole aim and hope was to make you happy, and now,’ he went on bitterly, ‘Lord Darell comes between us! A man whom you have literally seen but four times in your life. What your father will say I do not know; but I should imagine he would rather see you in your grave than the wife of such a man.’

‘I wanted you to help me, and you think only of yourself,’ sorrowfully returned Queen Mab. ‘Why won’t you be kind and help us, Ronald? a word from you would make my father——’

‘I help to make *you* the wife of Lord Darell?’ replied Sir Ronald almost angrily. ‘No, Queenie, that I will never do! If he were some good man who truly loved you,

and could make you happy, then I would sacrifice my own feelings to yours. But in this case I will not—much as I love you, I would rather see you lying dead before me than living to become the wife of the falsest, vilest man in Europe.’

‘He is not false or vile!’ she indignantly exclaimed. ‘It is only jealousy that makes you say so. I used to think that I could trust you to be just to anyone—now I can never look to you for help or advice again.’

‘And I will never again intrude my advice or my presence on you until you send for me,’ haughtily replied Sir Ronald, as he turned on his heel. ‘It is not for me to tell you of the crimes and vices of Lord Darell; Mr. Mostyn will doubtless endeavour to open your eyes. Remember that of your own free will you have sent your best friend from you, and save at your bidding he will never return.’

‘Ronald cannot really care for me much, or he would never have left me in such anger,’ mused Queen Mab, as she walked on alone towards the paddock, unreasonably wishing to keep the love, while she rejected the lover. ‘Poor Reginald ! all the world seems against you ! Well, it only makes me love you the more !’



## CHAPTER V.

‘**M**UST say Sir Ronald might have taken the trouble to be a little more explicit,’ grumbled Mr. Mostyn, as, with an open telegram in his hand, he turned towards his agent, who, seated at his desk, was busily engaged in looking over and filing a heap of papers. ‘“Come back at once—your presence is required.” What can he mean?’ impatiently continued the Squire. ‘Henderson, cannot you leave those infernal papers alone, and use what brains you have left in making out this telegram?’

‘Telegraph back and find out, sir,’ briskly replied the lawyer. ‘Sir Ronald,’ he continued lightly, ‘always was a shocking man of business. Mr. Mostyn, I really must ask you to sign these papers—they have been——’

‘Confound your papers!’ growled the Squire. ‘I wonder, seeing the state I am in, you are not ashamed to keep on worrying. Do you think, Henderson,’ he continued eagerly, ‘that that scamp has had the impudence to go down to Mostyn Hall?’

‘Our latest advice was that—well, that your brother was not in England,’ hesitatingly replied the agent. ‘He may have returned—but no, really I do not think he would have the impudence to go to the Hall. However, my dear sir, we must not conceal from ourselves——’

‘Henderson, you weary me to death with

your set phrases,' said Mr. Mostyn irritably. 'Conceal from myself—God knows I have concealed nothing! I know too well what his turning up means. I have always spent the rent-rolls of Mostyn freely. I have saved nothing; Queenie being my only child, I did not feel myself called upon to do so. Now, after an absence of over twenty years, this scamp turns up, with a wife too, and who—the Lord only knows! Perhaps a negress! Henderson,' went on the Squire impressively, 'have you realized that if I were to die Queenie would be penniless—that this scamp of a brother of mine is heir to Mostyn? It is enough to drive one mad!'

'I assure you, Mr. Mostyn,' gravely returned the agent, 'that no one sympathizes with you more than myself. But,' he continued cheerfully, 'I see no reason to despair. Your life is a good one—I should



say considerably better than your brother's, who, if we have been correctly informed, has led a life of reckless dissipation. So far as I can ascertain he has no money, but as yet I really know very little. I was thinking, Mr. Mostyn,' continued the agent shrewdly, 'that if he undertakes not to make himself known we might grant him a certain allowance. This would at any rate give us breathing-time, and perhaps, seeing that your life is so good, and taking into consideration that he has no children, your brother might for a specified sum sell the reversion of Mostyn Hall. Why, my dear sir,' continued the agent encouragingly, 'you may live to eighty! You might marry again. Your brother, I am sure, will see things in the right light'

'He may see them in the wrong,' retorted the Squire. 'Or if not, he may impose such conditions as I could not possibly

undertake to fulfil. You know, Henderson, that I have no ready money—I have never considered it necessary to lay by. How was I to know that this runaway scamp would ever turn up? It will break Queenie's heart to be turned out of Mostyn.'

'Humph!' ejaculated the agent, who, having had some experience of Queen Mab's influence over her father, was by no means so fond of her as the Mostyn tenantry. 'If I might presume, sir,' he went on blandly, 'I would suggest your paying attention to that telegram of Sir Ronald Estmere's. It must refer to something important, or I am sure he would never have sent for you at so short a notice.'

'Surely no man was ever so pestered as I am!' growled the Squire, rapidly signing several papers which his agent pushed

across the table, and then rising to his feet. 'I shall go down to Mostyn at once. I hope nothing has happened to Queenie! Good heaven, Henderson, I never thought of that! Suppose——'

'No, no,' hastily returned the agent. 'Sir Ronald would have mentioned it; he would not have left you in suspense. Though possibly the young lady *may* have got into some mischief,' he added ironically. 'She certainly——'

'I know you don't like Queen Mab, Henderson,' good-naturedly replied the Squire; 'and as she does not much like you, I do not wonder at it. Certainly all the rest of us have spoiled her dreadfully.'

'You never said a truer word!' muttered Mr. Henderson, thinking of the wayward manner in which, so far as his experience went, Queen Mab invariably behaved. 'I

believe,' he continued, aloud, 'that it was your daughter's persuasion, Mr. Mostyn, that induced you to give back farmer Crosbie half a year's rent. The man did not require it, but of course he got round Miss Queenie, and a pretty job I have had to keep all the others from following suit.'

'She is all I have left to care for, Henderson,' returned the Squire sadly. 'I don't pretend to say that I have not spoilt her—how could I help doing so? that is, in the matter of having her own way. But, though she is my own daughter, I will say that there is not a sweeter disposition or a kinder heart in England. And it would be hard to find a lovelier girl.'

'Her beauty is certainly beyond dispute,' replied the agent, as he moved towards the door. 'But I wish Miss Queenie would

not be so free in her promises to the cottagers ; they pay next to no rent as it is, but when to meet her orders I have to expend money on new roofs and outhouses, the estate becomes a sheer loss by the outlay.'

' Ah well, if it amuses her, what matter ? All she asks is out of kindness, and you can't expect her to be a woman of business,' returned the Squire. ' And mind you, Henderson, not a word about this affair of my brother Ralph having turned up. If he does not keep quiet, not a penny piece will he get from me ; and if he is unreasonable I'll marry again sooner than let him into Mostyn !'

' It will be a delicate matter,' muttered the agent, when he was left alone. ' I spoke more hopefully than I felt ; if all I have heard be true, Ralph Mostyn is not the man to give up a splendid property without

a struggle. And if in the meantime he wants money, he can get that from any insurance company.'

The Squire, when left to his own reflections, grew restive and impatient, though seated in a comfortable first-class carriage and whirled rapidly through the calm summer air. Regard the situation as he would—and it must be admitted he took a decidedly hopeful view of it—he yet felt ill at ease and doubtful. So far as he himself was concerned, the return of his brother, whom for twenty years he had looked upon as dead, made little impression on him. So long as he lived Mostyn would be his; but for his only daughter, whom he had fondly believed to be his heiress, the case was different.

'It will break her heart to be turned out of the old place,' he mused sadly, as his eyes wandered over the beautiful

green pastures and stiffly enclosed fields of the flying grass-country. 'Poor child, she has always been brought up as a little sovereign ; and were I to die to-morrow she would be a pauper ! The idea is too horrible. Something must be done ; if the required bribe be too high for me, Ronald Estmere will help me—he likes my little Queen Mab. Yes, surely between us we can manage. Hang it !' he continued, in a loud voice, 'I never ordered the carriage ; my wits must be wool-gathering. I shall have to take a fly. Henderson should have reminded me. Seven miles in a one-horse fly ! I would rather walk.'

To this last expedient, however, the Squire did not find himself compelled to resort, as on the train drawing up in the little station, almost the first familiar figure which attracted his attention was that of Sir Ronald Estmere.

‘I knew you would come by this train, and so I drove over to meet you,’ quietly began the young Baronet. ‘My mail phaeton is outside, and my greys will take you over within the half-hour.’

‘But what made you send for me, Ronald?’ asked the Squire, as, after giving up his ticket, he followed his servant and luggage across the line. ‘Nothing wrong at Mostyn? Queenie! Is——’

‘Queenie is *well*,’ replied Sir Ronald drily; ‘and there is nothing wrong at the Hall. What I have to tell you, Mostyn, I do from a sense of duty, unpleasant though it be. In my opinion your presence at home is urgently required, otherwise I would not have summoned you.’

‘I wish you would come to the point, Ronald,’ said the Squire hotly. As he seated himself by his young friend’s side,



the idea flashed through his brain that perhaps his brother had unexpectedly turned up at the Hall. 'I really am in no humour to guess riddles.'

'I think Lord Darell comes too often to Mostyn Hall in your absence,' abruptly began Sir Ronald, a flush passing over his open face. 'That is to say, if you do not want him as a son-in-law. And I should imagine——'

'Good heaven, Ronald, what are you talking about?' replied the Squire. 'Why, Darell has only come twice to Mostyn! And pleasant though he is, I do not mean him to come again. But after all he can do no harm; Queenie is only a baby, and she——'

'Has accepted Lord Darell as her husband,' said the young Baronet coldly. 'I do not know, Mr. Mostyn,' he went on, 'how many times you have asked

LORD Darell to the Hall; but in your absence he has been there continually. It is no affair of mine, except—except, to speak quite frankly, that I love Queenie more than anything in this world, and I know a marriage with Darell would mean a life of misery to her.’

‘Lord Darell marry Queenie!’ angrily exclaimed the Squire. ‘Are you joking, Ronald? I would rather see my child in her grave! But you must be mistaken; Queen Mab would never dream of such a thing. Why, she is only seventeen; and besides, I had an idea that you cared for her, and always hoped and intended that she should marry you. Why, God bless my soul, I thought we were agreed about that matter years ago!’

‘Queenie has, however, taken matters into her own hands,’ sorrowfully resumed the young Baronet, flicking his high-mettled

greys lightly with the whip. 'I remonstrated with her very gently only this morning, and her answer was that she never wished to see me again. I can hardly realize it,' continued Sir Ronald slowly; 'I have loved her since she was a baby. I would not care so much if Darell were worthy of her; but you know, Mr. Mostyn, what the Earl is.' .

'Know! By Jove, yes, I do know!' returned the now infuriated Squire. 'He marry Queenie—that depraved, vicious, sensuous *roué*! Young as he is, no greater villain exists. Cheer up, Ronald! You did right to send for me, but I will not tell Queen Mab you did so; it might still further prejudice her against you. What can Mrs. Desmond have been about?' went on the Squire irritably. 'She cannot have been blind to what was going forward. It was her duty to write to me. Darell,

indeed! Much he cares for my lovely little Queenie! Her great prospects and broad acres are what he requires. But I'll put a stop to it at once. I know more of his past than he is aware of.'

'Will you walk up from the lodge?' asked Sir Ronald, as he pulled his mail phaeton up opposite the great stone gates of the western approach. 'You might send down for your luggage, and I should not like Queenie to think that I had been speaking to you; she would not understand that it was for her good. You will be gentle with her, will you not?' he added in a lower voice.

'Gentle! have I ever been aught else to her?' asked Mr. Mostyn, as he climbed out of the high vehicle. 'Yes, Ronald,' he went on kindly; 'I will be gentle, but also firm. Good-bye, my boy; God bless you!'



## CHAPTER VI.

**I**N the breakfast-room of Heron Castle, Lord Darell leant against an open window, and gazed abstractedly on the park beneath. A pile of open letters lay on the table by his side, two of which had apparently more interest for him than the rest, for, with a sarcastic smile on his handsome face, he read and re-read them, as if wishing to learn their contents by heart.

‘So,’ he muttered, as, after reading the most bulky of the two for the third time, he replaced it on the table—‘So the old

Squire—in no very polite language, I must say—utterly declines to accord me the honour of becoming his son-in-law. The honour may in his estimation be a great one, and yet,’ he continued slowly, with a dangerous light in his dark eyes, ‘unless it was to be accompanied with a golden shower, I do not think it would have any great charm for me. Queenie is certainly a lovely girl; but I dare swear would prove a handful. That, however, I should be quite capable of managing; and as she has, or rather will have, Mostyn Hall and an ample fortune, my wife she shall become. I wonder,’ he went on contemptuously, ‘if old Mostyn thinks he can beat me in a game of this kind? If only I can get one interview—yes, only one—with Queenie, I shall be able to make the child do as I like. I really believe the little fool thinks she is the only woman I ever cared for!

This other letter from Lady Highworth is really annoying, and might prove mischievous. I must put her off the scent; once married to Queenie, her ladyship may do as she likes; but at present it would be awkward—yes, extremely awkward—if she were to cut up rough.’

Leaving the open window, the young Earl walked hastily towards the door, and having locked it, threw himself with a muttered oath into his huge armchair.

‘I suppose I must risk it,’ he mused, puffing the faint blue smoke in rings from his cigarette, and watching it vanish in wreaths through the open window. ‘Old Mostyn says that any communication of mine addressed to his daughter will be returned unopened. How kind of him to warn me—it makes my task all the easier! My Greek page, Alexis, has a thorough knowledge of these affairs.’

[ wonder,' he continued, with a sarcastic laugh, 'how many letters and notes that boy has delivered for me, almost under the eyes of jealous husbands and infuriated fathers? He shall find the means of taking a note from me to Queenie. I will write it now—and if her father watches her for a month I'll bet a monkey Alexis will manage it somehow.'

Rising quickly from his chair, Lord Darell sat down before a small table, littered with papers and correspondence, and wrote the following note:

'MY DARLING LITTLE QUEENIE,

'I cannot leave here without seeing you once more, to say good-bye. Your father—why, I do not know—has resolutely declined to allow me to see you, or even to write to you. I suppose he believes all the vile stories people tell of me; but in



common justice he should have allowed me a chance of refuting them. Queenie! you will be more kind, will you not? And let me see you once more before I go away for ever. Remember, if you refuse, that you are driving a man already mad with misery to utter desperation.'

'I think,' complacently observed the Earl, as he read the letter, 'I think that will about do. It seems to give a hint of suicide. Nothing a woman dreads more. Queenie is a child, and quite inexperienced—besides which, she believes she loves me with her whole soul. If Alexis only manages properly I will lay a monkey to a sovereign she will see me.'

After ringing the bell and telling the butler to send the page to him at once, Lord Darell, carefully sealing the note, rose from his chair and moved restlessly back to the open window.

Somehow or other he felt uncomfortable and ill at ease. He was young, and though his short life had been one succession of follies, his conscience at times still pricked him severely.

‘Why should I ruin this child’s career?’ he muttered, as he looked vacantly on the lovely scene below him. ‘I care nothing for her, and yet I have made her believe that she is the only woman this world will ever hold for me. I have half a mind to let her alone—I have half a mind to drop this sort of life altogether. I am sick of it. I wonder——Alexis, is that you?’ he went on aloud, as, turning suddenly, the slight form of his Greek page met his eye. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘A few minutes, my lord, replied the boy, with a slight smile. ‘Your lordship sent for me, and I came.’

‘Naturally you did,’ drily retorted the

Earl, every good feeling vanishing as he sternly regarded the beautiful boy before him. 'I wish to send you on an errand, one which you will please to execute carefully. What is the matter with you, Alexis? You look wonderfully solemn,' he continued more kindly, as the page lifted his flashing black eyes from the ground, and fixed them full upon him.

'This life is dull; it does not suit me,' boldly replied the boy, a flush of anger tinting his olive skin. 'Your lordship forgets that I am not what I appear. I will not stay here; this life is killing me! When do we return to Paris?'

'When I choose,' answered Lord Darell, toying absently with the tassels of his velvet smoking-suit. 'So you do not like Heron Castle, Alexis? What do you find amiss?'

'Everything,' angrily responded the boy. 'I am tired of this life; it is dull. I wish

to return to Paris. I would rather have been strangled on the Montenegrin frontier than brought here! I am the son of a prince!’

‘That will do, Alexis,’ coldly returned the Earl. ‘You must excuse me,’ he went on, with ironical courtesy, ‘if I fail to understand you. I grant that you are the son of a prince; but you well know that you have only a left-handed connection with a royal line. I am quite aware that gratitude from you is out of the question—what Greek ever possessed such a virtue?—but obedience I do expect. What would you be now but for me?’

‘I am not ungrateful,’ quickly returned the boy, large tears gathering in his dark eyes as he glanced reproachfully at his master. ‘You have been good to me; but for you I should be dead, or worse—a prisoner in the hands of my uncle, Prince Nit——’

‘Hush, boy!’ angrily interrupted the Earl, glancing uneasily round. ‘Walls have ears. I have forbidden you ever to mention that name. I have done what I could for you,’ he continued more calmly. ‘Yes, ever since the day I rescued you from a life of slavery, I have done what I could. You have your private rooms, horses are at your disposal, and money you have had in abundance. What more can I do? As it is, people wonder at the way in which I treat you.’

‘I am sorry,’ briefly replied the Greek page. ‘Your lordship sent for me—what are your commands?’

‘I wish this note delivered, Alexis, and there is no one here that I can trust as I do you. It must be done secretly—you quite understand? No one must know of it, and no one see you give it.’

‘That is easy enough,’ answered the boy,

with a smile. 'There will be an answer, I suppose? Miss Mostyn,' he continued, as he read the address. 'I hate her!'

'Hate her! what for, in Heaven's name?' asked Lord Darell angrily. 'Why, you don't even know her!'

'I know her to be the cause of our remaining here. And more than that—she once bade me hold her horse, and even Lady Highworth never dared to be so insolent.'

'I suppose she took you for a good-looking pert page,' laughed the Earl. 'Never mind, Alexis; bring me back an answer to that note, and twenty-four hours after receiving it we shall leave for Paris. That ought to induce you to do your errand speedily.'

'The answer shall be in your hands to-night,' replied the page eagerly. 'Ah, how lovely Paris must be looking now!

Your lordship need not fear that I shall tarry. If you have no further orders I will start at once.'

'Go, and return as quickly as you can,' answered the Earl, as he turned once more towards the open window. 'But do not be in too great a hurry, Alexis. Remember, secrecy above all.'



## CHAPTER VII.



IGHT had fallen, and from the western terrace of Mostyn Hall, the park, with its stately oaks, and calm placid lake bathed in floods of silver, looked beautiful in the extreme.

The dark blue sky, without a cloud to hide its millions of glittering stars, seemed like a huge azure dome rising above the grey turrets and sombre walls of the old Hall. Almost total silence reigned around; not even the quiver of a leaf broke the quiet of the night; and but for the hoarse call of the various tribes



of wild-fowl from the distant lake, a stranger might have fancied himself transported to some remote solitude where life was unknown.

Half reclining against the stone balustrade, and looking dreamily over the moonlit park below, Queenie, in a sort of trance, gazed silently on the surrounding scene. Dressed in white, with a belt of old gold coins, the girl made a beautiful picture as she leant over the old worn parapet. Her head was bare, and the rich coils of her sunny hair had a pale and strange appearance under the rays of the moon.

‘Eleven o’clock,’ she murmured, as the chimes rang out from the clock tower. ‘I said eleven. He should be here now—that is, if he is not afraid! But that I will never believe of him. Oh, why does everything——’

‘Queen Mab, my darling little Queenie!’

softly broke in the voice of Reginald Darell, who, unperceived, had mounted the flight of steps which led from the rose-garden to the terrace, and now stood by her side. 'Queenie, it seems an age since I last saw you. Are you glad that I have come, my darling?' he went on fondly, and with a tenderness which to their cost few women had been able to withstand. 'My little pet!' taking her two willing hands in his own and drawing her towards him; 'Alexis brought me your note, and I am here. I left my horse at the western entrance. But, Queenie, after your father's order to me, is not this spot rather ill-chosen?'

'No,' returned the girl decidedly, a rosy flush passing over her face as she withdrew her hands from his. 'No, Lord Darell; in no other place would I have met you. But you need not fear that we shall be

disturbed. My father always goes to bed at ten o'clock. I came out here from the tower, the staircase leads to my own rooms. Oh, Reginald !' she went on sorrowfully ; 'I would not have seen you now, but your letter alarmed me. Try and bear up for my sake, will you not? Though my father is angry now, in time, when he sees how you love me, he will not be so unkind.'

'Queenie,' answered the Earl, 'I wrote as I felt. Without you my life would be one of misery. Tell me, my darling, that come what may you will marry me. Why should both our lives be rendered wretched because of the absurd notions your father has of my past career? I assure you——'

'I cannot make such a promise,' interrupted Queen Mab in a firmer tone, as she drew farther away from her companion. 'My father has been so very good to me—'

he loves me better than anything in this world—and I will never marry without his consent. But that he will give in time, when he sees I can love no one but you.'

'Meanwhile,' muttered Lord Darell to himself, 'my affairs are getting into a state of fearful confusion, from which Mostyn's help might extricate me.' Aloud he continued: 'Then you cannot really love me Queenie. If you did, you would promise what I ask; your father would forgive us when once we were married. Oh, my darling, I cannot live without you! Do not drive me to despair. Remember, your father has forbidden me even to see you, and how can I live if we are parted? Come with me—once married, Mr. Mostyn will forgive us both.'

'I will *not*,' replied Queen Mab, in a low tone. 'Oh, Reginald, think of what you are asking! It would break my father's

heart. You do not know him. He would never forgive us, and in time you would only despise me for having done what you now beg me to do.'

'But, Queenie,' urged Lord Darell, in a more imperative tone, 'what if your father never consents? His letter to me was decided enough. Are we to grow old and grey waiting for what may never come? I do not believe you love me—you cannot, or you could not be so unfeeling.'

'I am not unfeeling—indeed, Reginald, I am not!' pleaded the girl, her voice trembling. 'But I cannot do what you ask me—at any rate not yet. Let us wait a few months, and then——'

Quick as lightning Lord Darell noted the hesitating manner of his companion. Experience had often proved to him the truth of the cynical adage—'When a woman hesitates she is lost.' And it was with

ill-suppressed triumph that, moving closer to her side, he took up her unfinished sentence:

‘Then, Queenie, if I wait a few months—say until Christmas—and your father shows no sign of relenting, will you marry me? Oh, my little Queen Mab,’ he whispered in his softest tone, ‘I cannot live without you—life will be a burthen! With you to help me I feel I could lead a good and useful career. Don’t send me away without one word of hope!’

Pale as the moonlight had already made her, Queenie grew perceptibly whiter at the end of the young Earl’s appeal. Totally ignorant of the world, and almost a child in years, she was no match for the hardened young *roué* by her side.

‘Why should I send him from me?’ she thought, as she glanced shyly into his eager earnest face. ‘He says that I can

save him, and I will. Yes, Reginald,' she added aloud, 'since you so much wish it, I promise what you ask—in December I will marry you; but I know that long before then my father will have relented. He never yet has refused me anything.'

'You promise,' hoarsely repeated the Earl, taking both her hands in his and drawing the trembling girl towards him. 'Will you swear it, Queenie?'

'If you wish, Reginald,' answered Queen Mab, with a faint smile. 'But I have always held a promise as sacred as an oath. To please me,' she went on fondly, 'will you try and lead a better life than report says you have led? You say that you love me, and I believe you—try, will you not?'

'I will, my darling,' returned the young Earl, turning his head aside to conceal the mocking smile on his lips. 'Henceforth,

my little Queenie, in order to deserve you, I will become a paragon of excellence.'

'Then you will be the first of your race who has ever been so,' broke in a sharp angry voice. 'Miss Queenie, what does this mean? Alone on the terrace, and nearly midnight! Servant though I am, if you do not come in at once I will rouse my master.'

'Who on earth is this old witch?' angrily exclaimed Lord Darell, as, by the clear light of the moon, he perceived a little bowed figure in deep black and with very white hair standing near them. 'Queenie, what is it?'

'A witch, am I?' indignantly repeated Queenie's old nurse. 'Aye, and perhaps more of a witch than your lordship thinks. Would your lordship like to hear some buried secrets? Would you care to hear



who murdered poor Mary Craig? Or would you like to know where you spent the 17th of November last in Paris? A witch, am I? Perhaps you never uttered a truer word.'

'Be quiet, nurse, I command you!' broke in Queen Mab, as she saw her companion's astonished look. 'You forget to whom you are speaking. Good-bye, Lord Darell,' she added, holding out her hand; 'I must leave you. Do not be offended at nurse's eccentricities; she is an old favourite of mine, and we humour her.'

'Remember your promise,' returned the Earl in a low voice, as with a sudden impulse, and totally oblivious of the presence of the indignant nurse, he kissed the hand he held in his. 'Good-bye, and take care of yourself, my little Queenie.'

But well though the Earl bore his discomfiture, as he turned to leave the moonlit

terrace his face grew deathly white, while his dark eyes gleamed with suppressed rage and fear.

‘The 17th,’ he muttered. ‘Paris ! What can that old hag know of that fatal night ? She can know nothing, unless indeed she be the very witch she looked.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Miss Queenie,’ began the old nurse sternly, after following her young mistress to her apartments, ‘I have never been so taken aback in my life as I was to-night, and I give you fair warning that I intend to tell my master everything I witnessed. I should be failing in my duty if I did not do so.’

‘If all you have to tell my father is that I met and spoke to Lord Darell to-night,’ coldly returned her mistress, ‘you can save yourself the trouble. I never have been in the habit of concealing anything from him,

and never shall do so. I intend to tell him myself. In the meantime, nurse,' she went on imperiously, 'it is rather late, and I wish to be alone. You will be good enough to leave me.'

Then, noticing the look of misery which crossed her old servant's face, the girl relented, and in a softer voice she continued:

'You may kiss me if you like, nurse, before you go. But you should not have forgotten yourself so far as to speak to Lord Darell as you did. You must never do such a thing again, or, much as I love you, Mostyn Hall can be no longer your home.'

'He is bad; he is unworthy of you,' sobbed the old woman, humbly kissing the hands, and even the dress of her beloved young mistress. 'Oh, Miss Queenie, if he were not, should I say so? but I love you as if you were my own. Send me away

from you; let me die in my old age far from all I love, and I will not repine; but oh, my child, listen to me in time! Earl Darell is worthless, not fit even to breathe the same air as yourself. I know——'

'That will do, nurse,' gravely replied Queen Mab, withdrawing herself gently but firmly from the old woman's frantic grasp. 'I do not wish to appear unkind, and you know I love you very much; but you must not presume upon that love too far. What you are talking about concerns my father and myself alone.'

And finding all remonstrance useless, with a heavy heart the faithful nurse slowly left the room.



## CHAPTER VIII.



EARLY two months had passed away since the events described in the last chapter. It was the Doncaster week, and the attention of the racing world was centred upon the Champagne Stakes, a race generally admitted to be the test of which is the best two-year-old of the season.

Even greater interest than usual was this year manifested by the racing world. Queen Mab, said to have been wonderfully tried at Newmarket some ten days before, had been backed to win a stake the magni-

tude of which aroused interest in the most stolid and careless racegoer. Many and various were the reports freely circulated, the notorious character of Lord Darell, her owner, only causing these rumours to be more eagerly received and loudly commented upon by the general public. Whether these stories were true or false, the fact remained that the unbeaten filly had been backed seemingly as unhesitatingly as though the race had been already won. Some even going so far as to assert, that owing to a bad July and worse Goodwood, her young owner had staked the whole remnant of his once fine property upon her, and that if by chance the filly should meet her match, the turf would have seen the last of the Heron Castle colours. This, however, was not generally believed. Though young, the Earl was well known to be as clever and experienced as most, if

not all, his competitors, and many persons sagely remarked that he was not the man 'to trust all his eggs in one basket.'

The fact was that the young Earl, after a very favourable trial, had laughingly offered to accept twenty thousand to seven thousand pounds, and not being accommodated, had taken five thousand to two thousand in one hand, and then had taken two to one to a very large amount. Next day, judging by the papers, a commission seemed to have been worked all over England, but whether for the owner none seemed to know. Well backed, however, by her owner and also by her clever trainer the filly certainly had been; and the public, following suit, rushed her to the unenviable position of first favourite, six to four being taken eagerly, while, bar two, eight to one was freely obtainable.

It was the evening before the decision of

the event, and Lord Darell, in a state of irritable excitement, after visiting his filly and holding a short conversation with his trainer, rang the bell of the front door of a small house he had taken for the week. On cooler reflection he regretted his extensive outlay. None knew better than himself the fearful difficulty he experienced in getting money. Nor was this all. A letter which he had written to Queenie, and which Alexis had succeeded in delivering, had been unanswered; Miss Mostyn returning a verbal message, that as she had promised to hold no communication with Lord Darell, she declined to do so until the time fixed upon should expire. Besides this, Lady Highworth had made her unwilling lord take a house at Doncaster. Having studiously avoided her ladyship in Paris, Lord Darell felt incensed at her following him. His short-lived passion



for her had long expired; and it was with no very pleasant sensation that, on his servant opening the door of his humble dwelling, he recognised a letter in her handwriting lying on his drawing-room table.

‘MY DEAREST REGINALD’ (the note began),—‘You *must* come and dine with us to-night. I really saw nothing of you in Paris, and I have so many questions to ask you. Your filly I am sure will win. Why did you call her “Queen Mab”? I must know. Sir Ronald Estmere and Mr. Mostyn are both dining with us; the latter says his little daughter is called Queen Mab. I *must* know all about it. Mind you come, or else I shall ask Sir Ronald to explain everything to me.

‘Yours ever,

‘GERTRUDE.’

‘ Ronald Estmere and old Mostyn !’  
vaguely muttered the young Earl, biting  
his lips till the blood came. ‘ Confound the  
woman ! what does she want ? I suppose  
she must go, or else she will chatter and  
bring old Mostyn even more against me than  
she is at present. But I must dissimulate,  
and it will go hard if I cannot hoodwink  
her a lot. I wish to Heaven I had never  
met the woman !’ and sitting down at the  
table, Lord Darell dashed off the following  
reply :

‘ DEAREST GERTRUDE,

‘ I shall of course be charmed to  
meet you. Queen Mab I think will  
do ; do you dislike the name ? I would  
have called her “ Gertrude,” but there is  
ready a mare of that name. You are  
quite right. Mr. Mostyn’s daughter is  
called Queen Mab, and people say that

she is to marry Sir Ronald. It would be a good match for both, as their estates almost join, but Heron Castle lies between.

‘Yours ever,

‘REGINALD.’

‘Yes,’ went on the young Earl to himself, as he closed and directed the letter. ‘Yes; Heron Castle does lie between, and in more ways than you will guess, my lady!’ and throwing himself on a sofa, Lord Darell tried to obtain a quiet half-hour’s nap.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘My dear,’ mildly began Lord Highworth—a very good-tempered elderly man—when, after all the guests were assembled, and dinner had been announced, Lord Darell had still not made his appearance, ‘I think we had better not wait for Reginald; he is always unpunctual.’

‘No, certainly not. We will of course go in,’ brightly replied her ladyship, though a close observer might have noticed an angry look in her beautiful blue eyes. ‘Sir Ronald, will you take——’

‘Lord Darell,’ here softly announced the butler, as he flung the door open, and instantly vanished to take his place in the dining-room.

‘My dear Lady Highworth, you must forgive me ; I see I am late,’ began the young Earl in his most persuasive tone, as he advanced to meet his hostess. ‘You must admit you gave me very short notice. Ah, Mr. Mostyn, how are you ? I am very glad to see you again. You have come, I hope, to be the herald of our victory ; I may say our victory, may I not, as we both come from the same county ?’

‘Sir Ronald also hails from the same

quarter,' returned the Squire, somewhat frigidly. 'And I believe he has backed your filly heavily. I myself rarely bet.'

'You are right, Mr. Mostyn,' laughed the Earl—a quiet, low laugh, which somehow jarred on the Squire's ears. 'Never put your trust in women or fillies; both are very dangerous unless you know them thoroughly. Estmere and I, however, must learn by experience.'

This remark, although it conveyed nothing to the assembled guests, sounded ominous to Ronald Estmere, and made him moody and silent during almost the whole of dinner, and totally inattentive to his next neighbour, a pretty, talkative girl of eighteen; who afterwards was wont to declare that, whatever people might say, she looked upon the young Baronet as the most utter fool she had ever met.

'Queen Mab! Yes, certainly it is a

pretty name,' commented Lady Highworth, during a lull in the conversation. She addressed her remark to Lord Darell, though she kept her large, innocent-looking blue eyes directed to the opposite side of the table, where Mr. Mostyn and Sir Ronald Estmere sat. 'But still it was a strange name for you to choose, Reginald. What made you think of it? Did you call her after the Queen of the Fairies?'

'Nothing half so romantic,' laughed the Earl, helping himself to a liberal supply of broiled mushrooms, and feeling that the keen grey eyes of the old Squire were fixed full upon him.

'Miss Mostyn did me the honour of allowing me to call my filly after her. It is a pretty name, as you observe, Lady Highworth. I hope she will not disgrace it.'

'Do not think it an impertinent question,

Darell,' interrupted Lord Dalton, who, knowing his hostess well, and seeing an ominous glitter in her blue eyes, good-naturedly came to the rescue; 'but there are so many stories about, one scarcely knows what to believe. Some say if your filly wins to-morrow that you will net a fortune; others say you have hardly backed her at all. Solve this riddle for us, like a good fellow, and tell us how matters really stand.'

'Willingly,' replied Lord Darell, as with an air of relief he turned from Lady Highworth, who, he knew too well by experience, was only meditating some fresh attack. 'I really do not stand to win a great stake. Of course you know, Dalton, the price never warranted my doing so. Still, if Queen Mab wins I shall clear about twenty thousand pounds, and if she loses—which the gods forbid!—I shall drop nearly

eight thousand, which will be about the proverbial straw to break my back.'

'I don't see how the filly *can* lose,' interrupted Sir Ronald Estmere. 'Fit and well as everyone says she is, unless she tumbles down, I fail to see anything in the race to extend her, unless Red Cloud has improved quite ten pounds.'

'We shall know by this time to-morrow,' lightly replied Lord Darell, rising from his chair to open the door for the retreat of the ladies to the drawing-room.

'But I agree with you, Estmere,' he continued, returning to the table and pouring out a glass of claret. 'Really I see nothing which can beat my filly. Even if Red Cloud has improved ten pounds since the July, Queen Mab has improved also. But Dawson tells me Green Ray has been tried remarkably well; Wood rides him, and the party seem wonderfully con-



fidant. Let me give you a bit of advice, Estmere,' he continued, in a confidential tone, and with an appearance of friendship that he was far from feeling. 'If Green Ray wins, buy him—never mind at what price, thousands do not matter much to you—and if that colt beats my filly, then he will win the Derby and St. Leger,' with which the young Earl crossed to the opposite side of the table, sat down next to Mr. Mostyn, and for a brief half-hour tried to make himself eminently agreeable; with such success that though the Squire at first remained cold and impassive, eventually he succumbed, as many a cleverer man had done, to the nameless charm of his companion's manner.

\* \* \* \* \*

'The ground is very deep, my lord,' remarked the great trainer of the crack two-year-old, as side by side with his

employer he walked down the course, and surveyed with an annoyed look the sodden trampled turf, made wet and holding by nearly fourteen hours of incessant rain. 'Your lordship knows as well as I do that our filly prefers good hard ground. She is so sound that a macadamized pavement would not be too hard for her. I need not hide from you, my lord, that the state of the ground is very much against us. Still, I think she can stay, and we know she has a rare turn of speed. Fordham will do her every justice, and despite the ground I have never been more confident in my life.'

'I shall back her no more,' returned the young Earl irritably. 'The ring field very strong. I expect there is a heavy commission out for Green Ray. The brute is second favourite; Red Cloud has gone back. Dawson!' he went on

eagerly, 'winning this race means a great deal to me. You know better than I do about the filly; is she a game one? If it comes to a struggle, Green Ray's breeding will be sure to tell a tale; on his sire's and dam's side, he was bred a coward. Will our mare struggle when called upon?'

'I do not know. I really cannot say, my lord,' responded the trainer, as he turned into the enclosure. 'She has never been beaten, never been collared. In our trial she won by a length hard held, and I tried her pretty high. I do not myself believe she can be beaten; but the state of the ground is fearful. She is very small, and her feet are slightly contracted. Now Green Ray has big feet which will suit this dirt. With your leave, my lord, I will tell Fordham to come right through and smother his field two furlongs from

home. Shall I give him his orders, my lord, or will you ?'

'All such matters I leave entirely in your hands, Dawson,' replied the Earl, as he moved away in the direction of the Peers' Stand. 'I shall not come and see her saddled either. I am sick of seeing the filly stripped.'

Settling himself in the far corner of the stand, Lord Darell, during the parade and preliminary canter, spoke not a word, though the keen eyes of Sir Ronald Estmere noted that when Queen Mab showed the old temper of her dam, Forest Queen, and resolutely refused to join her field, the Earl bit his lips, and his face grew a shade paler. Indeed, winning this race meant far more to him than any of his numerous friends imagined. It was a common story that he was hard up, and at times severely pressed for money;

but the vast extent of his liabilities was known to none save himself and his agent. Lord Darell was only too well aware that to get the eight thousand, should he lose, would tax even his fertile brain to the utmost; whilst to him winning meant a good round sum with which to pay off a few of his most pressing obligations, until he should marry the heiress of Mostyn, when he calculated upon being able to raise such a sum as would free him altogether.

‘I don’t like the temper the favourite displays,’ quietly remarked Lord Dalton, directing his powerful glasses down the course. ‘I am glad I have not backed her. Darell, do you wish to do so? I will lay you a small wager if you like.’

‘I don’t wish to make small wagers,’ replied the Earl almost sulkily. ‘But when once on her legs she will take a lot

of beating. She always does show temper ; I should have thought a good judge like you, Dalton, would have noticed that.'

'Well, I will lay you two monkeys,' repeated Lord Dalton, somewhat nettled at the other's tone. 'I think Green Ray will win.'

'Put it down,' hastily answered Darell, as he rapidly entered the bet. 'What an infernal row the ring are making !'

'They are off !' exclaimed Lord Dalton, as through his glasses he saw that both flags had fallen. 'Here, Darell,' he continued kindly, 'take my glasses. Your mare has got off pretty well.'

'Red Cloud is in front, and making the pace hot,' broke in Sir Herbert Vavasour. 'One could see by the market that Green Ray was the hope of the stable ; Red Cloud was simply started to make the pace as hot as he could.'

‘His bolt is shot now,’ sarcastically rejoined Lord Dalton, as, two furlongs from home, Red Cloud dropped back, and Green Ray, attended by Silver Star, Black Rose, and Queen Mab took a clear lead; ‘Green Ray will win, and easily too! Why, he is leading quite two lengths!’

A furlong from home, and the whole field presented a most extraordinary tail, which, owing to the cutting-down tactics of Red Cloud, had found a weak spot in all but the favourite, Green Ray, and Silver Star.

‘Queen Mab wins—the favourite wins—for a thousand level!’ eagerly exclaimed Lord Darell, as Fordham, shooting suddenly to the front, for the first time asked his mount really to gallop, and disposing of Black Rose and Silver Star as though they were ordinary hacks, raced head and head with Green Ray.

‘Done!’ replied Sir Herbert. ‘Green Ray wins! he covers twice the ground your filly does in every stride.’

‘I will lay it ten times!’ angrily replied Lord Darell. ‘See, Wood has his whip out! Queen Mab will win by six lengths!’

Running gamely under punishment, Green Ray, when two hundred yards from home, once more forged ahead, and flattered his backers; but, in spite of all his efforts, Wood could not shake the favourite from his quarters, and Fordham, for the first time using his spurs, raced to his head.

But the state of the ground was all against the game little filly; and fifty yards from home the demon sat down to ride in earnest, Queen Mab answering every dig of the spur and cut of the whip in the most resolute fashion. As they swept past the post neck and neck, it would have been hard to name the winner, except that three



strides beyond, Green Ray perceptibly had the best of it.

In almost breathless silence the occupants of the stand waited for the hoisting of the numbers, and when the figure 'four' was hoisted, Lord Darell drew a heavy sigh of relief.

'I am glad you have won, Darell,' kindly remarked Sir Ronald Estmere. 'But I should say it was the shortest head Judge Clerk has ever had to decide.'



## CHAPTER IX.

**T** was a lovely September morning, two days after the decision of the Champagne. The woods and park of Mostyn Hall were bathed in the warm rays of a really hot sun. The lake, covered with its usual swarm of duck and moor-fowl, looked like some large glittering gem, which had been dropped amidst the oasis of green and copper beeches which surrounded it, when seen from the western terrace of the old Hall. Hardly a breath of wind rustled the leaves of the oak woods; the cloudless sky reflected in the still waters

gave the lake the appearance of a huge sapphire.

A glorious day for shooting—at least so a sportsman would have said. Birds, even though before disturbed, would have been sure to lie close. And a glorious day an artist would have pronounced it, if he had been turned into the glades of the park with brush, palette, and canvas, and told to create a picture.

‘It is a shame to stay in the house on such a lovely morning!’ exclaimed Queenie after breakfast, throwing open the folding windows, and stepping out on the western terrace. ‘I suppose you will not come, Mrs. Desmond; but I shall walk down to the paddocks. I want to look at the foals.’

‘I have letters to write,’ replied Mrs. Desmond, ‘and unless you want me, Queenie, I do not think I shall go out

till after luncheon. I see,' she continued with a smile, 'that as usual your pack is waiting for you.'

'Yes, foxhound puppy and all,' laughed the girl, putting on her straw hat. 'The little rascal ought by rights to have joined the entry at the kennels, but I could not make up my mind to part with him, and now I suppose he will never leave here.'

Crossing the rose-garden, and climbing over the park-palings, Queenie reached the western drive, surrounded by her tribe of dogs, and made her way towards the paddocks, which lay at the extremity of the park.

'I wonder who that is on horseback!' she exclaimed, half aloud, as, on turning into one of the oak glades, she became aware of a horseman approaching her at a sharp canter. 'Come here, Moira!' she continued, seeing that the colley, with pricked ears,

evidently meditated a charge. 'I do believe it is Ronald; how very awkward! I have not seen him since that unfortunate day when we quarrelled. Of course our park is a short cut for him to Estmere—but I thought he was at Doncaster.'

Sir Ronald it undoubtedly was, and as he was cantering along at a pretty good pace, the girl had but a short time in which to determine how she should receive him.

'After all,' she murmured to herself, 'Ronald and I have known each other since we were both babies, and it is absurd for us to quarrel and avoid each other now. Besides, if I did wish to avoid him—which I don't—it would be very difficult.'

The thick foliage of the surrounding trees, and the winding nature of the path along which he was riding, had effectually concealed Queenie and her small pack of

dogs from the young Baronet's view, until a sudden turn brought them face to face. Moira, not at all understanding how matters stood, rushed frantically forward to greet an old friend whom for some time he had not seen, and with many a bark of joy jumped up and fawned upon him, thereby sending the nearly thoroughbred hack into a state bordering on frenzy.

'Come here, Moira!' exclaimed Queenie, as, do what she would, a merry laugh escaped her lips on beholding the astonished and dismayed look of the Baronet. 'Sir Ronald, I am so glad to see you; it seems ages since we last met. But how came you here? I thought you were at Doncaster.'

'Queenie!' cried Sir Ronald, throwing himself from his hack, offering his hand, and looking wistfully into the fair young face beside him; 'I had not the smallest notion of meeting you at this hour. How

early you are ! I returned from Doncaster by the night train, and ordered a hack to meet me. My mother is not very well, and I was suddenly called home. You are looking very bright, Queen Mab.'

'Did you back my namesake?' asked the girl, as a rosy flush dyed her cheeks. 'But I am sure you did. Lord Darell, I see by the papers, is said to have won a small fortune. 'I suppose,' she continued hurriedly, 'you saw him at Doncaster.'

'Oh yes, I saw him,' briefly returned Sir Ronald. 'I met him at dinner at Lady Highworth's, and of course also on the ground. I believe he won about twenty-two thousand pounds; but I'm afraid it will not do him much good.'

'Why should it not?' indignantly asked Queenie, withdrawing her hands from her companion's grasp. 'I should say it would do him a great deal of good ! You must

be jealous because you did not win as much yourself.'

'Don't be silly, Queen Mab,' replied Sir Ronald good-naturedly. 'You know that is nonsense; if I wanted twenty thousand pounds I could get it without gambling. But I did win a very good stake, though not so much as Lord Darell.'

'Did my father say when he was coming home?' asked Queenie, stroking the nose of Sir Ronald's hack. 'I think he might have written to me.'

'To-morrow, I think. He went up to London last night,' replied Sir Ronald, somewhat absently. 'Henderson telegraphed for him. I cannot make your father out, Queenie; he looks so worried and careworn, and he never seems to be out of Henderson's London office.'

'Nor can I,' sorrowfully answered the



girl. 'He used to tell me everything, now he tells me nothing ; and only a fortnight ago when I went to his study and asked him for a cheque for three hundred pounds to pay the monthly accounts, he seemed quite upset. After he gave me the draft he said, "You must try and economize a bit, Queenie ; if I were to die to-morrow you would be very badly off." What *could* he mean, Ronald ? Then he seemed angry with himself that he had said even so much, and would tell me nothing more.'

'I do not know—I cannot imagine,' returned the young Baronet. 'Mostyn Hall is entailed ; it must come to you as next heir. Your father called on me only a week ago, and asked me, in case anything should happen to him, to look after you, and not leave you to the cold charity of strangers.'

‘And what did you say?’ inquired Queenie, with a forced smile. ‘You laughed at him, I suppose?’

‘Well, yes, I *did* laugh,’ candidly confessed Sir Ronald. ‘The request seemed so odd to me. But of course he knows, and you know too, that were you a beggar to-morrow, the revenues of Estmere and all I have would be at your service.’

‘I thank you,’ answered Queen Mab, looking haughtily at her companion; ‘but I shall never be likely to require them. Mostyn Hall, and what it brings, is quite sufficient for me.’ Then seeing the pained expression on Sir Ronald’s face, she suddenly relented. ‘Dear old friend,’ she said impulsively, ‘forgive me! I know how kind you really are, and how indulgent you have always been to me. If you do not wish to get home very soon, will you walk with me

now to the paddocks, and come and lunch before you ride back ?’

‘Of course I will,’ gladly answered Sir Ronald, throwing his hack’s bridle over his arm, ready to walk down the green ride, smooth and soft as velvet. ‘I love you so well, my little Queenie, that to make you happy I would willingly give you half my fortune, even to enable you to marry some other man.’

‘I can’t quite believe that, Ronald!’ laughed Queen Mab, taking the reins from her companion’s arm; ‘and as such an event is never likely to occur, we will not discuss the subject. Let me lead Orange Blossom; she used to follow me about better than Moira does.’

‘You promised that you would let me give her to you,’ said Sir Ronald reproachfully, as they walked down the beautiful glade side by side. ‘The mare is too slight

for me, and though I say it who should not, there is not a better huntress in the shires. She would carry you splendidly. Will you ride her some day and try her, Queenie ?’

‘Certainly I will,’ frankly answered the girl. ‘I should love to. Will you give me a mount on her with the Cottesmore ? How fast time goes ! in another six weeks we shall be hunting again. I should like to ride her, Ronald ; but I cannot take her from you. And that reminds me of what I ought to have done before. You will not be angry, will you ?—but I want to return all those presents you gave me ; the lovely pearl necklace must have cost a fortune. Indeed I never knew you wished to marry me, or I could not have accepted them.’

‘You certainly would drive a saint into a passion !’ angrily exclaimed Sir Ronald, halting suddenly, and confronting Queenie with heightened colour. ‘Return every-

thing I have given you if you like ; but I shall only pitch them into the lake. Do you tease and torment me on purpose, Queenie, or is it through utter innocence ? You never used to provoke me so. Before you saw Lord Darell, I don't think we exchanged an angry word. What folly has seized you ? Though your fortune were treble what it will be, you could not marry him unless you were prepared to lead the life of a pauper. Heron Castle is mortgaged to the very plate and pictures. Darell, I should say, owes quite half a million of money. Even though you were to sell Mostyn, you could not hope to pay a fourth of his debts. And he has only a fleeting fancy for you. I suppose you are the hundredth woman he has sworn he loved. I do not speak vindictively, Queenie, but I know that were you penniless, Lord Darell would no more think of

marrying you than he would any other beautiful though portionless girl. Those very greys he gave you were paid for with my money ! At Doncaster he tried his utmost to induce me to lend him another five thousand pounds. Queenie, you have known me all your life ; have you ever known me do an ungenerous thing, or say behind another's back what I would not say to his face ? I am telling you this only because I am resolved to do my utmost to save you from what would be a life of misery.'

'I will send the greys to your stable to-night,' coldly replied the girl. 'I am compelled to believe you, for I never knew you tell an untruth. It was wrong, very wrong of Reginald to borrow money from you. It shall be repaid. If he cannot do so, I will ask my father for the money. I am sorry——'

‘Are you mad, Queenie?’ cried the young Baronet furiously. ‘Do you suppose I would take money from you? As for your father, I should think, much as he loves you, that he would decline to advance such a sum as would pay what Lord Darell owes me, even at your request! And as for the greys, if you send them to Estmere, I will have them shot, or return them to Heron Castle.’

‘Let us close this conversation,’ replied Queenie, in a very wearied voice. ‘You may be right—Lord Darell may be utterly unscrupulous; but remember that I *love* him, and that he loves me. I have always believed you to be the kindest, sincerest friend I should ever have—do not make me regret that belief. I tell you, Ronald, that I love Lord Darell as I shall never love again. If you care for me as you say you do, never return to this subject.’

‘ Well, I did not begin the conversation **this** time,’ angrily replied Sir Ronald ;  
 ‘ but I will not promise never to renew it. **Knowing** what I do, and loving you as I **always** shall, I should be wrong, criminally **wrong**, were I to allow you without re-  
**monstrance** to marry a man whose conduct **is** notorious in every European capital. I **tell** you candidly, Queenie, that if I can **prevent** it, you never shall marry Lord **Darell** ; and I think it may be in my **power**.’

‘ Will you be kind enough to say how ?’  
**haughtily** inquired Queen Mab, a flush **of** indignation rising to her face. ‘ You **have** no right to speak in such a manner, **Ronald**. I like you too well to be seriously **angry** with you ; but I must say you are not going the right way to prove your **affection** for me.’

‘ To save you from a life of utter wretched-



ness,' rejoined Sir Ronald, 'I am willing to make any sacrifice in my power. Remember, I would not do what I intend doing, if Lord Darell were an honest man who loved you well and truly. Every scrap of paper he has out, every bill which bears his name I shall buy up. It will cost me a fortune to do so, but do it I surely will. And when I stand in the position of his sole creditor, we shall see whether he loves you or his fortune best. But knowing him as I do, I would stake my life that to save his money he will willingly throw you over.'

'He never would; it is cowardly of you to say so!' answered Queenie passionately. 'It is base and cruel of you to utter such a threat, and I hate you for it! You——'

'Are the best friend you will ever have,' interrupted Sir Ronald; 'and some day, Queenie, you will acknowledge that I am

**right.** Why, to have all his bills taken **up**, and returned to him, Reginald Darell **would** pawn his soul to the arch-fiend !'

'I am sorry I met you this morning ; I **am** more sorry that I asked you to stay,' **angrily** retorted Queen Mab. 'If you wish **to** do me a favour you will leave at **once.**'

'Certainly,' answered the young Baronet, **taking** the mare's rein from his companion's **arm** and throwing himself into the saddle. 'You will also please to remember that **our** meeting was quite accidental, and in **no** way sought by myself. If ever you **should** need me, Queenie, you know I **shall** be ready to come to you.'

Without another word, and hardly giving Queen Mab time to reply, Sir Ronald rode quickly away down the forest glade.

'We seem fated always to quarrel,' murmured the girl, as she looked with

a somewhat disappointed air after the retreating figure, feeling half-annoyed, half-surprised that her old friend should have obeyed her request so promptly. Do what she would, her conscience pricked her severely. Sir Ronald Estmere, she knew well, was incapable of telling a falsehood; and with a feeling of mingled anger and grief she began to realize that Lord Darell might not be so perfect or so ill-used by the world as she had brought herself to believe. 'How could he borrow money from Ronald!' she mused bitterly, as she turned into the entrance-gates of the home paddocks. 'Better far that he should have borrowed it from my father. I can scarcely understand it. He must have known that Ronald wished to marry me, and yet he placed himself under an obligation to him! I must say, had I been Reginald, I would rather have died.'



## CHAPTER X.

**A**BOUT a week after Sir Ronald's meeting with Queenie, he sat alone in his small cosy study at Estmere, moody, and apparently buried in thought. As a matter of duty he had gone round his stables, and, after inspecting his costly stud, had given a few orders as to the horses he wished got most forward for the coming season. But, to the amazement of his stud-groom, he had evinced little of his wonted interest in the welfare of his favourites. Though his stables were the best in the shires, and kept up regardless

of expense, he had been in a very fault-finding mood, and had driven his trusty head man almost to the verge of insanity by his searching questions and bitter remarks.

‘Which is what I cannot understand,’ explained that much-injured individual, in a subsequent conversation with Lady Estmere’s coachman. ‘Man and boy, I have been in these stables for thirty years, and never been so spoken to. You would hardly credit it, Mr. Armstrong, but when I suggested that our five-year-old chestnut by Vedette would hardly stand another season if not fired, Sir Ronald turns on me, and, before three helpers, orders me to hold my tongue, and not talk about what I did not understand. I assure you I was struck almost dumb.’

‘I am told it is just the same in the house,’ sagaciously returned the coachman.

‘Last night Mr. Holdford, the butler, omitted to ice the champagne, and Sir Ronald turned on him before all the footmen, and told him if he did not know his duties he had better say so. Her ladyship took Holdford’s part, and said she had given the order, whereupon Sir Ronald got up and left the room. What the meaning of it all is I cannot say—Sir Ronald used to be the kindest and best of masters.’

‘Lost heavily at Doncaster, perhaps,’ suggested the stud-groom. ‘And yet that can hardly be so, for by the papers I read he backed the winner for a big stake. He has taken to riding the hacks in an alarming manner. Three of them now are lame, and Blue Ruin has not been watered since six o’clock this morning. I never know when I may be called upon for a horse to be galloped almost to death over hard roads.’

‘It is no business of ours,’ wisely replied the coachman, as he lit a pipe and proceeded to take himself off to his own stable. ‘But my opinion is our master is losing his reason. Giles tells me he never goes to bed until four o’clock, and then rings his bell at six. Giles is getting as thin as a hurdle, and says he will give notice.’

‘He may say so, but he won’t,’ sarcastically rejoined the stud-groom. ‘Seventy pounds a year, and the pickings he has, which come in all to another fifty, are what Giles will never see again. I dislike the man; I never knew a good servant yet who wore a frock-coat and gloves, and smoked cigarettes. Not but what I will say he turns Sir Ronald out, in breeches and boots, as neat or even neater than any valet in the shires.’

‘Fit even to ride your horses,’ laughed the coachman, turning away. ‘Her lady-

ship has ordered the barouche at twelve o'clock, so I must be seeing that things are in order.'

Through all his life Sir Ronald had been accustomed to have matters pretty much his own way, and since his eighteenth year he had reigned like a prince at Estmere.

He was passionately attached to his lovely old home; but now everything seemed to have lost its former interest in his eyes. Sitting alone in his study, his hot head resting on his hands, he thought bitterly over what might have been, and how happy might have been his lot if Lord Darell had never come to Heron Castle.

'If I could only believe that he loved her!' he mused sadly. 'But I know that Queenie's money is all Darell cares about. And yet I cannot make her understand this. She thinks I am jealous, and that I wish to run him down, when, Heaven knows, my



thoughts are only of and for her. Married to that man, her life will be one of simple wretchedness. And yet what can I do? How can I make her see her folly before it is too late? I ought to have been forbearing and gentle with her, instead of which I was harsh and severe. Poor child, how should she know, brought up as she has been, that men of Darell's stamp are not to be believed?'

A sharp tap on his locked door here suddenly terminated Sir Ronald's painful reflections, and it was with an air of something like relief that he rose from his chair and turned back the key.

'A groom has just ridden over from Mostyn with this note, Sir Ronald,' said the footman, 'and he was ordered to take back a verbal message at once.'

'Tell the man to say I will come immediately,' said the young Baronet, as he

hastily scanned the note. 'And, John, order Blue Ruin round in ten minutes. Tell Giles to put me out some riding-things, and to be quick about it ; or, stay, tell him to bring the things here'—and as the footman left his study, Sir Ronald once more read the note :

'DEAR RONALD,

'Will you come here at once? My father returned from London yesterday, and I cannot make him out. He seems so fearfully depressed and upset. I can get him to tell me nothing. Do come at once! If I was unkind the other day, you will, I know, forgive me. I never meant to be.

'Yours ever sincerely,

'QUEENIE.'

'In troubles and difficulty she still comes to me, as she used when a child,' reflected the young Baronet, swinging himself on to

Blue Ruin, and sending that willing animal down the avenue at a pace which made his stud-groom stare in amazement. 'Well, so be it ! If I can only be of use to her, and take her troubles on myself, I shall be contented.'

Fast though Sir Ronald invariably rode his thoroughbred hacks, yet Blue Ruin, if he could have spoken, would have vouched for the fact that never before had he been pushed along at such a pace. Nearly clean bred, however, and in good hard condition, he covered his seven miles of road under twenty-five minutes, and having scarcely turned a hair, broke into a gallop, as he dashed through the western entrance and got on sound turf, as if the seven miles had been less than so many hundred yards.

'Miss Mostyn wished me to say, Sir Ronald, that she would like to see you

in the blue drawing-room,' respectfully announced the grey-haired butler, when the Baronet presented himself at the entrance-hall. 'This way, if you please, Sir Ronald.'

'Oh, Ronald, it is kind of you to come so quickly!' cried Queen Mab, rising on his entrance, and coming eagerly forward with a rosy flush on her face. 'But indeed I knew you would. My only fear was that you might not be at home.'

'What is the matter, Queenie?' kindly asked Sir Ronald, as, after shaking hands, he seated himself by the girl's side. 'I am utterly in the dark; your short note explained nothing. Where is Mr. Mostyn?'

'In his study,' replied Queenie, as she twisted her handkerchief nervously between her fingers. 'He has been there since eight o'clock this morning. Not a morsel of breakfast has he touched; and when I went to him he almost broke down; he

called me his poor little ruined girl, and I could see that his eyes were full of tears. And, Ronald, he looks so aged and miserable! I tried to comfort him, but he told me gently but very firmly that he wished to be alone. I did not know what to do,' went on the girl, tears coursing rapidly down her cheeks; 'and so I sent for you. You are not angry, are you?'

'Angry!' echoed Sir Ronald. 'Queenie, what are you saying? No, I am only too glad if I can be of use—and I trust I can. Your father has probably been speculating, and met with a heavy reverse. I can imagine nothing else, or he would not have talked of you as ruined. I pray God that is the worst; if so, it is easily mended. All I have is at his service, and I would even part with Estmere to assist him in any way.'

'How good you are!' said Queen Mab

softly, a smile of hope playing over her face. 'Will you go and see him, Ronald, and try to cheer him up? Do, for my sake, and ask anything you wish from me in return.'

'No, Queen Mab,' returned Sir Ronald, with a sad look in his dark eyes; 'that I will never do. All I have is at your father's service; but we will leave you out of the question. I should indeed be a wretch and a villain if I turned your misfortunes to my account. What do you take me for? Queenie, I thought you knew me better.'

'Come, then,' hastily answered the girl, rising from her chair, a sweeter look stealing over her face than Sir Ronald had seen there for many a day. 'You are good and kind; I shall always remember it. But come and see father now.'

'Do not come in with me, Queenie,' said

Sir Ronald in a low voice, as they halted at the green-baize door outside the Squire's sanctum. 'Let me see your father alone. I will not even say you sent for me. Cheer up, Queen Mab! I promise to bring your father to luncheon as bright and cheerful as he has ever been. Suppose you go and order a good spread for us—I for one am fearfully hungry.'

'How could I ever have been unkind to him?' mused the girl, as she turned away. 'How generous and forgiving he is! Dear old Ronald, I will never be angry with him again.'

'Who is that?' peevishly asked the Squire on Sir Ronald's entrance, moving restlessly in his chair, but not lifting his head from the table, which was littered with papers. 'I gave special orders that I was not to be disturbed. I really must beg——'

‘It is I, Mr. Mostyn,’ said the young Baronet quietly. ‘I trust I am not disturbing you?’

‘Ronald!’ exclaimed the Squire, in a tone half of surprise, half of joy. ‘My dear boy, I did not know it was you! Why, you have not been here for an age. Have you seen Queenie?’

‘Yes, we have been having a long chat,’ laughed Sir Ronald. ‘Come, Mr. Mostyn, what can you be studying that mass of papers for? Can’t I help you? I am not a bad hand at figures.’

‘I am sick of poring over them,’ sorrowfully observed the Squire, pushing his chair back from the table. ‘Ronald, some day I will tell you a story which will interest you, as you have known us all your life, but which you must reveal to none—though, alas! at a later date it will be known too well. My child, hitherto looked upon and



petted as the heiress of Mostyn, will at my death be a beggar, dependent for her bread on the charity of others.'

'If instead of keeping all your troubles to yourself, you would allow me to share them,' gently interrupted Sir Ronald, 'I think you would find them easier to bear. You know I will help you if I can. Why not tell me all about it at once?'

'Well, sit down there and listen,' said the Squire, with a heavy sigh, throwing himself back in his chair, and motioning his companion to a seat close beside him. 'And if you can see a way out of the business, Ronald, it will be more than I can do at present.'

'You do not object to my smoking?' asked the young Baronet, as he drew his cigar-case from his pocket. 'Smoking always assists me in thinking out any difficult problem.'

‘The story need not be a long one, though it is annoying enough,’ went on Mr. Mostyn, looking anxiously at his young friend. ‘More than twenty years ago, as perhaps you may have heard, my brother Ralph left England. Hearing nothing of or from him after the lapse of years, I, like the rest of the family, believed that he was dead. Indeed, it seemed proved beyond a doubt that he sailed in that luckless vessel, the *City of Athens*, which went down in mid-ocean, and was never heard of more. Ralph, as you perhaps know, left England because—well, because he could not safely remain in his own country; and after the first shock of learning his supposed death, I came to the conclusion that it was perhaps as well he had been taken. Every debt and liability that he had left I paid off, thereby clearing his name so far as I was able. And after all these years of absence,’

went on the Squire after a brief pause, 'he now turns up—and with a wife, too !'

'Any children?' quickly demanded Sir Ronald, at once grasping the situation.

'No children,' briefly replied Mr. Mostyn. 'And as he has been married ten years, the probability is that there will be none—which, to say the least, is a mercy ; for I believe my misguided brother picked up Mrs. Ralph somewhere in Texas. However,' continued the Squire, with a weary sigh and a look of utter dejection which struck a chord in Sir Ronald's heart, 'the matter is bad enough. Should I die, Ralph must succeed. I have no power to burthen the property, and my little Queenie will be dependent on the charity of her uncle. It is fearful to contemplate. Fancy Queen Mab the forced companion, aye, and the dependent companion, of my brother's wife ! Worse still, Ralph has intimated

to me through Mr. Henderson, that should he succeed, he intends to sell Mostyn, as his tastes would not suffer him to live here. He *can* sell the place ; he is the last in the entail. Even though he had a son he could bring our old home to the hammer. All this news, as you may easily imagine, Ronald, has shaken me severely. By Henderson's advice, and in order to secure a fitting income to Queenie, I endeavoured to insure my life. Three offices and four doctors have refused me. For the last few years I have felt weak and ill, and have also experienced strange fits of lassitude and irritability. A high medical authority has declared that I have heart disease, which may kill me any day. Indeed, Ronald, I wonder all this worry has not killed me already. I hardly ever sleep, and can eat nothing.' And here, with uncontrollable emotion, the old Squire

bent his head upon his hands and sobbed aloud.

‘Mr. Mostyn,’ gently began the young Baronet, rising from his chair, and going to his friend’s side, ‘what you have told me is very sad, especially as regards the state of your own health. But for Queenie’s sake you should not give way so. Worry and bother must be bad for you, and you should take care of yourself in order to take care of her. As to the rest,’ he went on more cheerfully, ‘I see nothing so very alarming in it. Listen to me : should such a fearful event happen as your death, and should Mostyn come into the market, I will buy the dear old place. I can easily do so ; I have not raised one penny on any of my properties. If Queenie should marry me, then Mostyn will be hers as much as ever it could have been, for I would settle the estate upon her. If, however, she should

persist in her present infatuation for Lord Darell, then—well, even then she should still have Mostyn Hall. But I do not think,’ he continued rather bitterly, ‘that Lord Darell will trouble her much when he knows that she is penniless. However, that will prove his love, and if he still wishes to marry her, I will own I have wronged him, and say that he is worthy even of Queen Mab.’

‘Do you really mean what you say, Ronald?’ hoarsely exclaimed the Squire, springing to his feet, and, with a look of joy which had long been a stranger to his eyes, grasping his young friend’s hand. ‘Will you do what you have said? Queenie will marry you, of course. Wilful though she is, she cannot refuse you when I tell her all. Darell!’ he continued in a contemptuous tone; ‘I would rather see my child married to one of my keepers.’

‘But I *will not* have Queenie told,’ hastily interposed Sir Ronald. ‘Mostyn, you must promise me to tell her nothing. She shall consider herself free, as free as though she was what she believes herself, heiress of Mostyn. Darell you can tell, but make him swear to keep it a secret. If after he knows that Queenie is quite without fortune he still wishes to marry her, then I shall be ashamed of my suspicions concerning him, and as a reparation will give Queen Mab her old home as a wedding present. You need not, however, tell him that. Let us see how he will act. Your brother, I suppose,’ he went on inquiringly, ‘can be bribed to be silent?’

‘Yes, that he has promised, on condition that I pay him a thousand a year,’ replied Mr. Mostyn. ‘But, Ronald, you are wrong in not allowing me to tell my child. Believe me——’

‘She shall marry me because she loves me, or not at all,’ returned Sir Ronald firmly. ‘I would not take her on any other condition. Come, Mostyn, I promised to bring you into the dining-room for luncheon. I like to keep my word, and I am uncommonly hungry, whatever you may be.’

\* \* \* \* \*

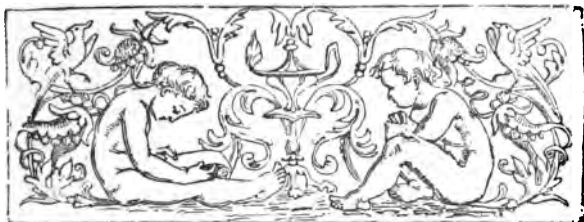
‘I knew Ronald would bring you round, father,’ exclaimed Queen Mab, as, with one glance at her father’s cheerful face, she threw her arms round his neck. ‘But I am quite jealous of him,’ she continued. ‘He has made you happy when I could not.’

‘He has done what you, with all your love for me, never could have done,’ answered Mr. Mostyn gravely. ‘Queenie, if his coming here to-day was your doing, as I more than suspect, it was a happy



thought of yours to send for the best friend either of us will ever know. Ring for luncheon, darling; Ronald is hungry, and so am I.'

'Thank you, Ronald,' murmured the girl in a very low voice, placing one of her hands lightly on his shoulder as she passed him. And though Sir Ronald Estmere had pledged himself to a possible outlay of some two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, he felt amply repaid.



## CHAPTER XI.



HREE months had passed away, and the hunting season was in full swing. Never had there been a more open winter; never, in the memory of the oldest sportsman, a greater quantity of foxes or a better scent.

Mr. Mostyn, relieved for the time of the worst of his troubles, seemed to have taken a new lease of life, and the determined and even rash way in which he rode, reminded his friends of long-past days, when the name of Mostyn was a household word in the grass-countries.

To see her father again cheerful and seemingly contented, at first raised Queen Mab's spirits to a buoyancy which since her acquaintance with Lord Darell had been unknown. But as time drew on, and the day, nay, even the hour approached on which she had promised the young Earl to leave her home, Queenie grew silent, absent, and unhappy. True as steel, the poor child thoroughly believed that she was bound in honour to carry out her fatal promise. Time after time had she talked to her father on the subject, but only to be met with the same cold stern refusal.

‘I will hear no more of it, Queenie,’ had been the Squire's last and somewhat angry reply. ‘My child, I have given you all your life whatever you have wished. The fact is, I have spoiled you. On this question, however, I shall remain firm.

Lord Darell is no fit husband for any young girl of your position. If he marries, let him marry some woman of the world. He would break your heart in a year, or harden you into some resemblance of himself. Besides, what are you to marry on? Lord Darell, I know, has won since the Doncaster week some thirty thousand pounds. I admit that he is clever, but he is utterly ruined. So long as I live I could give you a fair income, but at my death what would you do?

‘I wish you would not talk of dying,’ his daughter had replied sadly. ‘But if you did, then Mostyn would be mine—at least mine and Reginald’s, would it not?’

‘Mostyn may or may not be yours,’ her father had angrily returned. ‘Queenie, I am surprised at you; do you mean to say that you would sacrifice our old home and acres to relieve the charges on Heron

Castle? Much as I love you, you make me in my old age bitterly regret that I have not a son.'

'Ronald, at any rate, is my friend,' thought the girl. 'He will help me, and tell me what I ought to do. I will tell him everything—yes, all ; and if *he* fails me, then indeed I must believe that I have no friend in this world.'

And having made up her mind on this point, Queen Mab, as was her custom, proceeded at once to act upon it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Quorn hounds were advertised to meet at Ragdale Hall, and as this meet was only some eleven miles from Mostyn, Queenie and her father, their horses having gone on, determined on driving.

The greys, much to the Squire's disgust, were the pair his wayward daughter chose to order for the occasion. But in such

small matters as this, Mr. Mostyn invariably allowed Queen Mab to decide.

And though he would gladly have returned the greys to Heron Castle, he was too easy-going and too indulgent to Queen Mab to trouble himself much about the matter.

‘You don’t look well—what is the matter, Queenie?’ asked Sir Ronald Estmere, riding up to her side some few moments after the hounds had moved in the direction of Thrussington.

‘I only look as I feel,’ rather drearily replied the girl. ‘But do not mind me, Ronald. I think I shall ride home. My head aches—I hardly know what is the matter with me.’

‘Then I shall ride back with you. I certainly shall not allow you to ride eleven miles alone,’ said Sir Ronald, with decision. ‘But indeed I think you had better drive.’

My brougham is at the Hall—it is lucky that I drove to-day ; I hardly ever do such a thing. Come, Queenie, my second horseman shall tell your father.'

'But you will lose the hounds,' argued the girl, as, following her companion, she trotted into the Ragdale stable-yard. 'Please go and join them; Firr said he never saw a better-scenting day.'

'I shall drive home with you,' coolly returned Sir Ronald. 'Queenie, you are as white as a ghost. I certainly shall not leave you.'

'Then come—that is to say if you really do not want to hunt. Indeed I wish to speak to you, and I am sure you will not mind giving up to-day for me, will you, Ronald? I am so thoroughly wretched.'

'I would give up hunting from Kirby Gate day to Croxton Park, to be of use to you,' answered the young Baronet

simply. 'Come, Queenie, the brougham is ready ; my second horseman and Miles will see to the horses. Let me pull that fur rug over your knees,' he added, as the brougham dashed at a rapid pace towards the high-road. 'Queen Mab,' he continued, 'I wish you would tell all your sorrows to me as you would to a brother. I will help you if I can ; and if I cannot, at any rate I will hold sacred all you like to tell me.'

'I wish you *were* my brother—I do indeed,' almost sobbed the girl. 'I should not be heiress of Mostyn then, and nobody could accuse Lord Darell of only wanting my money. Ronald, you are so good and kind, will you not help us ? My father will not listen to me—he treats me like a baby ; but if you would speak to him he would listen, and prevent me from doing what I otherwise must do. Ronald !' added



the girl hesitatingly, 'I have promised Lord Darell, if my father will not consent to our marriage, to marry him after Christmas—even though to do so I have to leave my father's house unknown to him.'

'You promised Darell *that*, Queenie?' slowly and calmly asked her companion. 'It was a rash and foolish promise; but a promise once made should be kept. I suppose he extorted it from you? Never mind—I *know* he did,' he continued with a sad smile, as he saw the flush which crossed the girl's hitherto pale face. 'Of course, my little friend, I shall respect your confidence; you knew I would not betray you, but it was cruel of you to lay such a burthen upon my shoulders. I cannot say I envy you. Lord Darell is a bad man; he will never make you happy; he does not really love you, but unfortunately he has made you love him, as he has many another

woman. I gave seven hundred guineas for the pair of bays that are in my brougham now—they go well, do they not?—and, Queenie, I would lay them against your gardener's pony that Lord Darell will not wish to marry you after Christmas. Nay, even that he will write and tell you that he has made a mistake.'

'What do you mean, Ronald?' asked the girl, fixing her eyes wonderingly on her companion. 'You would not dare to say so to his face.'

'Yes, I should, Queenie,' hotly replied Sir Ronald; 'and I should also *dare* tell Lord Darell that your future rent-roll weighed more in his eyes than yourself; and if I were wrong I should frankly beg his pardon and do anything in my power to make reparation. Write to Darell to-night, and tell him that in the event of your father's death, Mostyn will not be

yours—that, in fact, you will be almost penniless; then remind him of your promise to marry him after Christmas, and if he still urges you to fulfil it, impose any penalty on me that you like—order me to kneel before him and ask his forgiveness, and I will do so.’

‘I shall do nothing half so ridiculous,’ angrily replied Queen Mab. ‘My father, I am afraid, must have got into difficulties out of which you helped him; it was kind and generous of you, and I love you for it, and always shall, but I will not write a lie to Reginald. Mostyn is entailed, and must come to me, should I outlive my father. At least it would be mine and Reginald’s,’ she continued coldly, taking a cruel pleasure, like a thorough woman, in inflicting a stab on the man whom she knew adored her.

But not for one moment did Sir Ronald even dream of showing resentment or annoy-

ance. It was in a tone of almost intense sadness that he replied :

‘ Unfortunately that is not so, Queenie. If your father were to die, Mostyn would not be yours. Your uncle, your father’s brother, it seems, is alive and married. After Mr. Mostyn he would be the future Squire, and his wife—an ill-bred woman, I am told—would take your place. If your father were to outlive his brother you would succeed—but not otherwise.’

‘ Then I am not heiress of Mostyn?’ asked Queen Mab, in a voice so hard, cold, and dreary that Sir Ronald involuntarily turned towards her. ‘ Ronald, you were only trying me—it was unkind of you ; but say you were, and that you only meant to frighten me.’

‘ Frighten you,’ sorrowfully repeated the young Baronet. ‘ Queenie, what do you take me for ? But do not give way ; things

will all come right yet. Don't cry so bitterly. What a brute I was to tell you! And yet you must have been told, sooner or later.'

'I don't care a straw about the money,' went on the girl, sobbing; 'but the dear old home, I loved it so! Uncle Ralph will sell the place; nurse has always told me fearful stories of him. He will never care for the dear old Hall and all my people. Ronald, say it is not true that he is alive!' she urged piteously.

'Your uncle Ralph cannot sell Mostyn while your father lives,' returned the Baronet cheerfully, 'and your father may live till he is eighty; but should your uncle have power to sell Mostyn Hall, then, Queen Mab, I should buy it. You would rather I did than a stranger, would you not?'

'How could you?' eagerly inquired the girl. 'Mostyn would fetch an enormous

sum ; I know half the minerals have never been worked. Some Birmingham man——’

‘Would have to bid half a million of money before I left off bidding against him,’ interrupted Sir Ronald quietly. ‘Were it necessary, I would sell my Northamptonshire property to buy Mostyn.’

Up the broad sweeping avenue of Mostyn Hall, at the rate of full fourteen miles an hour, trotted the thoroughbred bays ; and though the drive was fully two miles in length, after Sir Ronald’s last words Queen Mab kept totally silent. At the hall-door she left the brougham without a word, and, followed by her companion, entered the great entrance-hall.

‘I know you always wish me to do as I like,’ she began hurriedly, when they stood there side by side. ‘So you will not think me rude if I leave you ? I am tired, ill, and quite unnerved—I must

go to my own room. Ask for what you want. Indeed,' she continued bitterly, 'I know not why I should tell you to do so ; the place is probably more yours than mine already. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Queen Mab,' returned Sir Ronald kindly, though his heart ached at her resentful coldness. 'I am sorry I had the disagreeable office of telling you what perhaps others might have done less kindly. Good-bye.' And without another word the young Baronet turned away.

'Ronald, come here !' called Queenie, her heart as usual smiting her for her unkind words. 'Ronald, you must bear with me ; I am not strong, and I am so miserable. How kind and patient you have been I can never say, but I cannot talk to you now ; come to-morrow if you like. Say good-bye kindly now.'

‘Good-bye is a horrid word, Queenie,’ returned her friend, with assumed gaiety. ‘Don’t fret yourself, my little pet. Believe me, all will come right in the end. I shall not come to-morrow; most likely you will wish to be alone. I will come when you send for me, but not before. Adieu, Queenie!’ and rapidly crossing the entrance-hall Sir Ronald once more entered his brougham.

That same evening a messenger rode at full speed to Estmere, to summon the young Baronet back to Mostyn Hall; but on what errand must be told in another chapter.





## CHAPTER XII.



THRUSSEINGTON, although situated in by no means the cream of the Quorn country, is still one of the best draws in the plough.

The great grass fields, with their stiff post and rails, thick oxers, and black bullfinches, do not exist as round about Barkby Holt ; but a good fox from Thrussington Wolds, with his head for Bunny, means on a fair scenting day a good run, to see which nerve and judgment must both be brought into play. Five minutes after Queenie and Ronald Estmere had driven away from

Ragdale stables, the shrill blast of Tom Firr's horn brought his willing pack flying from the cover, and settling at once to their fox they drove him at a rattling pace towards Lord Aylesford's gorse.

'We are in for a stinger,' cheerily called out Lord Nessborough, one of the hardest and best riders from Melton, as side by side he and Mr. Mostyn charged a stiff staken-bound fence, with an ugly drop. 'He does not mean the gorse, Tom; 'I'll bet a hundred he sinks the Hoby Vale.'

'Hope so, my lord,' rapidly answered the great huntsman, cleverly picking up his horse, which had pecked on landing, and gazing anxiously at the fleeting pack, and then on the surging galloping field. 'Catch them if you can,' he muttered viciously, digging his spurs home, and taking his place alongside the racing pack. 'You will all need to ride if you mean to.'

Ten minutes at the speed hounds were running soon disposed of two-thirds of the ambitious field, and as the pack raced past Hoby Scholes and headed for the far-famed Hoby Vale, Lord Nessborough drew a deep sigh of relief.

‘Well done, Mostyn!’ he exclaimed involuntarily, as, riding slightly wide of Tom Firr, the Squire sent his favourite hunter at a black forbidding-looking fence through which daylight was hardly discernible, and smashing a hidden rail like a bit of paper, landed well into the next field.

‘What a beastly place!’ he added to himself, when his horse, dropping his hind-legs, barely escaped a rattling fall—‘did not go fast enough, I suppose.’

Pressed by the pace, the fox, thinking discretion the better part of valour, now turned sharp to the left, and gaining a few

minutes by his judicious wheel, headed as if for Cossington gorse.

‘Don’t ride at that, sir!’ ‘Take care, Mostyn!’ almost simultaneously exclaimed Firr and Lord Nessborough, as, having been thrown slightly out by the turn of the fox, Mr. Mostyn sent his horse at a low straggling fence, on the landing-side of which yawned a wide, deep, rotten-banked ditch.

The Squire, however, either did not hear or refused to heed. Mounted on one of the best animals in his stable, he probably thought he might take a liberty. The game horse certainly did jump well, and as far as he could; but he was blown, and took off a stride too soon, the result being a crashing fall, which even to the reckless Lord Nessborough seemed bad enough.

‘Hurt, Mostyn?’ he cried, jumping from his horse and approaching his friend.

Then as his practised eye fell on the

prostrate, huddled form, an exclamation of alarm escaped him.

‘Is the gentleman much hurt, sir?’ inquired a burly farmer, as, catching sight of the two, he cantered up. ‘A nasty place that; it is on my land, and I always meant to fill it up. Is the gentleman badly injured, sir?’

‘He is *dead*!’ replied the Earl, in a horrified voice. ‘His neck is broken. My God! what an awful thing!’

‘Dead!’ incredulously repeated the farmer, as he sprang from his horse—‘surely not dead, my lord. Why, it is Mr. Mostyn!’

‘This is awful,’ went on Lord Nessborough, in a trembling voice. ‘His poor daughter! What am I to do? Is there a house anywhere near here? We must get him home; and I must, I suppose, prepare that poor child. For heaven’s sake, man,

‘Don’t stand staring! How far is the nearest house? Can we carry him between us?’

‘My house is close by—we can take him there,’ returned the farmer, in an awed voice.

‘Dear me, how shocking! Mr. Mostyn, too, the best landlord in the shires!’

‘Let us take him at once,’ said the Earl rapidly. ‘Have no fear, I am very strong,’ as the farmer cast a doubtful eye upon his slender though well-knit figure. ‘Don’t tie my horse up; he will follow me, and I must ride to Mostyn Hall.’

After having seen the dead body of his friend carefully laid on the sofa of the farmer’s little parlour, Lord Nessborough halted at the door, irresolute and perplexed as to what he should do next.

‘I think, perhaps, Farmer Houghton,’ he began in a very disturbed voice, ‘that it may be as well if you will send to the nearest inn and procure a fly. By doing

so you will help me greatly. I could then ride on to Mostyn Hall, and stay there until——’

‘I quite understand, my lord,’ gravely interposed the kind-hearted farmer. ‘And sad though the affair is, I shall always consider myself honoured by the trust your lordship puts in me. Not a farmer in the shires but would have been proud to be a tenant of Mr. Mostyn. You, my lord, will have a fearful task in preparing his poor young daughter. I will follow to Mostyn as soon as I can procure a fly.’

‘Well then, I will be off,’ returned the Earl hurriedly. ‘How I shall ever get through this fearful task, I know not ! It seems my fate to have to announce these dreadful accidents. It was I who had to carry the news of poor Carrisbrooke’s death to his mother.’

\* \* \* \*

‘But, nurse, surely Lord Nessborough cannot wish to see *me*?’ exclaimed Queenie impatiently, as for the second time her faithful old servant entered her room. ‘Say I am not well, and that my father has not returned. Where is Mrs. Desmond? I really cannot go down, nurse; I am *not* well.’

‘His lordship said something about Mr. Mostyn,’ answered the nurse, in a low voice, ‘and he looks so pale and upset, Miss Queenie. Do you think any accident can have happened? I would see his lordship if I were you.’

‘An accident!’ echoed the girl, as she sprang to her feet. ‘Nurse,’ she continued imploringly, ‘what is it? Why should you think so? I will go at once to Lord Nessborough—where is he?’

‘In the blue drawing-room,’ replied her nurse, in a broken voice. ‘Shall I come



with you, Miss Queenie? Mrs. Desmond will not be here until evening.'

'Yes, come,' hurriedly replied Queen Mab, as she left the room, and, with a fearful presentiment of approaching evil, passed rapidly along the old oak corridor which led to the blue room. 'Lord Nessborough,' she began, in such a hard, cold voice that it haunted the Earl to his dying day, 'tell me what is the matter? Nurse says there has been an accident to my father. Oh, please do not keep me in suspense!'

'Mr. Mostyn has had a very bad fall, sadly returned Lord Nessborough, averting his gaze from the white face and imploring eyes which seemed to read his inmost soul. 'Indeed, Miss Mostyn,' he continued gravely, and with a compassionate look at the sorrow-stricken little form, 'I am afraid you must prepare yourself for the worst. Your father——'

‘Is not *dead*—oh, say he is not dead!’ cried Queenie, in a sharp agonized tone. ‘He has had a bad fall, I know what you mean—he is hurt, but I will nurse him so well and take such care of him—Lord Nessborough, tell me that I shall hear him speak to me, hear him call me his darling again!’

Pale as ashes, the Earl, with a violent struggle for composure, glanced pityingly on the slight figure trembling before him.

‘He did not suffer,’ he murmured tenderly. ‘Miss Mostyn, you should be thankful to know even that. My poor child, try to bear this dreadful blow bravely. It is better that he should have had no pain. My God!’ he continued, as he looked into her blank and tearless face, ‘she will lose her reason if she does not cry. Miss Mostyn, Queenie, you know he loved you beyond anything, and you

loved him—you should be glad that he did not suffer.'

'Loved me!' repeated the girl mechanically. 'Yes, he did—and I loved him;' and bursting into a flood of tears, she threw herself on the sofa.

'Those tears have saved her,' muttered the Earl, as he turned away. 'Poor child! though I hardly know her I would give my right arm to take half her wretchedness upon myself. Can I be of any use?' he continued, as he turned to the old nurse. 'Let her cry; do not disturb her—but tell me, can I do anything?'

'If you could send for Sir Ronald Estmere,' replied Queenie's nurse brokenly. 'I do not know what to do, my lord. There is no one here to act; would you send for him? A groom could gallop over to Estmere. I cannot leave my poor child. Sir Ronald would know what to do.'

‘I will do so at once,’ returned Lord Nessborough. ‘And I will wait until he arrives. Take your young mistress to her own rooms; she must not see her father before Sir Ronald comes. I will go to the stables and despatch a messenger to Estmere. Sir Ronald will be here in less than two hours,’ and with a quiet step the Earl left the apartment.

‘Poor child!’ he said to himself, when, after having despatched a groom from the stables, he went to the western terrace, and, lighting a cigarette, gave himself up to meditation. ‘I never saw such an expression of hopeless misery. I have heard how utterly devoted the two were to each other—the more so, I believe, because she has not another near relative in the world. I suppose she will marry Estmere; there was some rumour about Darell, but for her sake I hope it had no foundation.

Poor Mostyn ! how bright and full of life he seemed this morning at the coverside ! and now—well, after all he died as he would have wished to die, and his fate might be mine to-morrow.'



## CHAPTER XIII.



HE streets of Paris looked cold and dreary in the extreme. Snow had fallen heavily, and a thaw soon setting in, rendered the pavements and thoroughfares slushy and disagreeable. The sky was of a dull leaden colour, and the whole atmosphere seemed to be made up of damp and fog.

Such weather at any time is calculated to be depressing ; but to one in Lord Darell's condition, it was simply unbearable. Largely though he had won at Doncaster, and successful though he had been at play,

the amount won—in all fifty thousand pounds—had barely sufficed to clear off his most pressing obligations.

What man is there, possessing a splendid though heavily burthened estate, who does not know by experience that winning a lot of money means a simple rain of bills? And to this rule Lord Darell had been no exception. Creditors who before had deemed it advisable for their own interests to wait, had made one mad rush to receive at any rate payment in part, and Lord Darell had been generally credited with double, and in some cases treble the amount that he had really won, the result being that hardly five hundred of his fifty thousand pounds remained, while pressing demands for some two hundred thousand pounds poured in upon him.

To add to his embarrassments, nearly all his tenantry had demanded a reduction of

about twelve per cent.; and during the last week, in a mad attempt to continue his run of luck, he had lost some five hundred thousand francs, or nearly twenty thousand pounds. The splendid and world-renowned family jewels had been his last resource, and some of these he had pledged for nearly double the amount mentioned. But as they were heirlooms, and strictly entailed, an action had been brought against him by his heir at law. This action he had for the time staved off by the payment of some two thousand pounds, and a promise that within six months the jewels should be reclaimed, backed by a threat that if this offer were not accepted, he would marry, and thereby effectually bar his far-off cousin from any hopes of the succession. The money and the threat combined had been effectual for the moment, and his cousin had accepted the conditions.



But how to obtain the money required to redeem the jewels within the specified six months, Lord Darell knew no more than a child. Cool and clear-headed though he was, he felt himself to be in a desperate strait; and, like a thorough gambler, he resolved to cast his all upon one throw. His peerless filly Queen Mab was engaged in the Derby, Oaks, and Doncaster St. Leger. For the last-named event he knew her to be almost a certainty. But the date was too far off. The time he had been given would have long expired. With the bad lot of fillies in the Oaks, he well knew his mare was a certainty, and therefore no price of any use to him could be obtained. The Derby was his sole chance, and for that race Lord Darell had determined to gamble as even he had never gambled before.

In the midst of all his troubles and

worries, Lord Darell never lost his head. Coolly as if no such fearful stake had been at issue, he had gone over the list of probable starters against him. Aided by his trainer, he had reduced the issue to a nicety. If fit and well, Queen Mab would win. No colt which had ever run could concede her the weight for sex ; and for the fillies, they were composed of a lot which could hardly make her gallop.

May, however, was still far off, and Lord Darell was sorely puzzled how to meet his numerous household expenses. Besides the large amount annually spent upon Heron Castle, his racing establishment and house in Paris required a great deal of money. In vain his agent had remonstrated, and entreated him, for a time at any rate, to put down some of his costly houses.

To this Lord Darell turned a deaf ear.

To do so he knew would only be to advertise his ruin, and that, with Mostyn Hall and its broad acres almost within his grasp, he felt would be utter madness. Once married to Queen Mab, his knowledge of the financial world told him that to raise a hundred thousand pounds would be no very difficult affair ; and should his peerless filly win the Blue Ribbon, he would start afresh once more.

He had played heavily the night before, and had won a nice stake, which he resolved to keep firm hold of. No power, he mentally resolved, should make him part with it. But all his worries and bothers, which on a bright sunny day would have been easily thrown aside, weighed heavily on him, when at eleven o'clock he noted with a shudder the thick, gloomy fog, and generally disagreeable appearance of the weather.

‘ You can tell Monsieur Sambres,’ he said

peevishly on issuing from his bath, as his valet, after wrapping him in a gorgeous dressing-gown, announced that the celebrated financier wished to see him, 'that I can and *will* see no one. I am extremely unwell, and the sight of his pallid face would make me worse. What he can want to see me for passes my comprehension. Send breakfast up at once, and tell Alexis I require him immediately.'

'Very good, my lord. But Monsieur Sambres said he called by appointment,' replied the man, as he laid his master's letters and papers on a small ebony table. 'Sad accident in the hunting-field, my lord, I——'

'Please to give my message to Sambres, and my order to Alexis,' briefly returned the young Earl, seating himself in a huge armchair. 'I am not fond of horrors, and accidents have no charms for me ;' and as

the servant left the room Lord Darell, after carelessly opening half a dozen notes all in the handwriting of women, hastily tossed the remainder aside.

‘Alexis,’ he said, when the Greek page made his appearance, ‘I want you to take that note to Lady Highworth. There is no answer, but see that her ladyship gets it. What are you staring at—have you taken leave of your senses?’ he asked angrily, as the page looked at him in some astonishment. ‘Have you never taken Lady Highworth a letter before, that you need stare so?’

‘I thought your lordship would probably wish to leave at once for England,’ replied the boy. ‘I thought that——’

‘Leave for England! Why should I?’ angrily interrupted Lord Darell. ‘I have no such intention, at least not at present. What made you think of such an absurdity?’

‘It is in the English papers,’ replied the page, taking up the *Morning Post*, and preparing to open it. ‘Mr. Mostyn, of Mostyn Hall, was killed yesterday in the hunting-field.’

‘Mostyn dead!’ exclaimed Lord Darell incredulously, as he took up the paper. ‘How fearful! Poor child! she was so fond of him. Leave the room, Alexis,’ he continued sternly, ‘and see that I am not disturbed until I ring.’

‘Poor child!’ resumed the Earl, when he was left alone. ‘How terribly she will feel it! But still I cannot break my word. I will write and tell her how deeply I sympathize with her, but I will not return before the appointed time, unless she recalls me. Much as I coveted her money, heaven knows I never dreamt of such an accident; and yet this is foolish,’ he went on. ‘Even if I would I could not bring

the old Squire to life again; and now Queenie is mistress of Mostyn it would be absurd to throw away the chance for which I have been so long striving. Besides, I honestly do like the girl for her own sake; though of course, had she not been heiress of the Mostyn estates, I would never have told her so. Neither she nor I were ever meant for a life of comparative poverty. But now, as I have grown almost to love her, it would be ridiculous to throw away her acres and herself for a false sentiment. Ronald Estmere loves her, as I well know I never could love any woman; but I do not see why I should release her on that score. Her money will be useful, and though Ronald Estmere would marry her were she a pauper, I do not see why I should allow my own interests to suffer. No—my mind is made up; marry her I will, and I will try and make

her a fair husband—that is to say, if she does not baulk me in what I want. I hope Estmere will not require his money at present ; but I don't believe he will. He is a sentimentalist, who would, I firmly believe, give up the woman he adored, if he fancied she would be happier with another !' And with a sarcastic smile on his handsome face, Lord Darell leaned back in his chair and quietly lit a cigarette. 'I see another way,' coolly went on this young reprobate, of whose type happily but few exist. 'If Ronald Estmere loves her, as I believe he does, he will part freely for her sake. A hundred thousand pounds would not be much to him—he could get it at four per cent.—and four thousand a year off his princely rent-roll is a mere flea-bite. I would give up Queenie for that—it would put me straight. However, I will bide my time. I have fallen into



a good thing, and no man knows better than myself how to work it. I will leave for England to-night. I am sick of Lady Highworth, and she is quite capable of compromising me. In fact I believe her idiot of a husband is beginning to take alarm, so I had better put him off the scent at once;' and rising from his chair, Lord Darell rang the bell to give orders for his immediate departure.

'I shall leave by the night mail for England, Alexis,' he began, as the Greek once more appeared before him. 'I do not think I shall require you, and I know you are happier in Paris. Neither shall I require any of the servants here—except, of course, my valet. Tell him I shall want things for a fortnight; and if Lady Highworth sends to know where I am, you can say at Newmarket. Any of my horses are at her disposal; but remember, on no

account let her ladyship believe I am at Heron. Tell what lies you like, but see you do not let her know where I am.'

'That will be easy,' answered the boy, as he turned to leave the room. 'I have always heard women were quick-witted, but I have not found them so. Your lordship will, I suppose, leave by the 4.15 from the Gare du Nord?'

## CHAPTER XIV.



THE funeral of the popular Squire of Mostyn Hall was a thing of the past. Crowds had collected from far and wide to do the last honour in their power to one who had ever been the best liked and most respected landlord in the Midlands.

Queenie's grief and subsequent illness had rendered it imperative that she should not herself attend the funeral; and though the poor child pleaded hard, she had at length yielded to the arguments and entrea-

ties of Lady Estmere and Mrs. Desmond.

Nearly a month passed away before she was once more able to leave her room, and until she could do so with safety Mr. Henderson resolutely refused to have the late Squire's will opened.

Of Ralph Mostyn the outside world knew nothing. Sir Ronald had kept the secret of his existence even from his own mother, and Mr. Henderson was not inclined to be more communicative. Several long consultations had taken place between him and the young owner of Estmere, but on what subject none save themselves had even the faintest idea.

Lord Darell, in his selfish heart, had not the smallest conception of the intensity of Queen Mab's grief. Two letters which he had addressed to her had been returned to him unopened by Lady Estmere, with a

curt note to the effect that Miss Mostyn was far too unwell to receive or answer letters.

Angry and impatient, the young Earl spent most of his time between London and Heron Castle, his doings in the capital by no means being such as would repay close inspection—nursing meanwhile in his breast the wrath which he felt towards poor Queenie, whom he unjustly suspected of faithlessness.

It was nearly the end of December before Queen Mab once more expressed a wish to leave the Hall; and as the weather was mild and open, Lady Estmere did not oppose her.

‘I want to walk round to the paddocks. I should like Ronald to come with me,’ she exclaimed, with a slight touch of her old imperial manner. ‘I have much to talk over with him that has been too long

neglected. It is of no use to try and check me, Mrs. Desmond, for I intend to go,' she continued, when her governess made some slight demur. 'Is Sir Ronald staying here? . If not, please send for him.'

'Ronald has never left the Hall except to attend to matters of business chiefly connected with *your* estate, Queenie,' Lady Estmere rather coldly replied. 'Poor boy, he has spared himself no trouble; and I am sure he never would, on your behalf.'

'I am sure of it too,' the girl replied with a faint smile. '*My* estate will need very good management! Has Lord Darell never called or written?' she went on in a firmer voice. 'It is strange if he has not.'

'He wrote twice,' replied Lady Estmere tartly; 'but I returned his letters. You were not well enough to receive them.'

'Ah, well! Where is Ronald?' asked the

girl, with a sigh. 'I want to see him ; he is not out, is he ?'

'No ; he is in the library, waiting for you, Queenie,' said Lady Estmere. 'Put on this fur coat, my dear child, and then go to him. Speak kindly to him ; he seems fearfully worried and vexed, apparently about some affairs connected with your property. Indeed, Queenie,' she added earnestly, 'the poor boy has worked night and day for you.'

'Has he ? dear old Ronald ! But I expected nothing less from him,' replied the girl, in a low voice. 'I will go to him now, Lady Estmere ; and I shall be probably engaged with Mr. Henderson all the afternoon. I am a very bad hand at business, but I can trust Ronald and Mr. Henderson.' And slowly descending the great oak staircase, Queenie made her way towards the library.

Before a table heaped with documents and papers, sat Sir Ronald Estmere. His forehead was wrinkled, and his face white and careworn. He had evidently been hard at work since early dawn, for two candles which had burnt low in their sockets stood unremoved before him.

On Queen Mab's entrance he rose to his feet, and took both her white trembling hands in his.

'Ready dressed, I see, Queenie?' he began, in a voice which he compelled to have a brave and cheery tone ; 'you always were punctual. My hat is in the hall ; we are going to the paddocks, are we not ? It is quite warm and mild out of doors, but I am glad to see you are well wrapped up.'

'You look fearfully ill and worn, Ronald !' observed Queenie, as they walked down the broad drive. 'What is the matter with you ?'



‘Well, Queen Mab,’ responded the young Baronet, ‘you see I have had a good bit of work to do, and I suppose I am not accustomed to it. That Uncle Ralph of yours,’ he went on savagely, ‘is little short of a brute. Though he means to sell Mostyn, he wished first to come down and take possession. I had a great deal of trouble to keep him away’ (Sir Ronald did not add that a cheque for two thousand pounds had come out of his pocket for that purpose). ‘I had also to open your father’s will, Queenie—forgive me for mentioning his name,’ he added hurriedly, ‘but it was inevitable. The plate, wines, horses, carriages, and ready money are left to you; all the rest goes with the property. Your poor father had not saved a shilling.’

‘I do not care for money. I suppose the things when sold will give me a small income,’ replied the girl sadly;

‘but the dear old place—I have loved it so!’

‘It cannot be helped, Queenie,’ returned the young Baronet, in a tone of sympathy. ‘Your father made me his sole executor, and I have had everything he was able to leave to you valued. I believe the amount is some ten thousand pounds; and I have made that offer, which Mr. Henderson will advise you to accept. I——’

‘It is absurd,’ interrupted the girl proudly. ‘The cellars are half empty, and the carriages are old. The plate, at the utmost, is not worth two thousand five hundred. I certainly shall not accept the offer.’

‘But you *must* take the highest bid, Queenie,’ said her companion imperatively. ‘You have no option. As for Mostyn Hall, I shall make a bid for that, but I am afraid I shall be run very hard to secure it. They

say the property abounds in minerals. But whoever bids against me will have to bid high.'

'Ronald, I will not have you do this,' murmured Queenie, in a choked voice. 'I am sure that you are doing it only to please me. Good, noble, and generous of you, but quite out of place. I cannot be to you what you wish me to be—no, not even to remain mistress of my dear old home. Ronald, cannot you understand? I love you dearly, I should be an ingrate did I not; but I do not love you as I love Lord Darell, and you are too considerate, I know, to press me further.'

'I am not working for my own ends,' replied Sir Ronald sadly. 'You misunderstand me, Queenie. But you are also mistaken in Lord Darell; when he knows that you are no longer mistress of Mostyn he will not marry you. Send for him and tell

him all. My darling, you are giving gold for dross — Lord Darell would marry a barmaid to-morrow, if she had a million of money left her.'

'I am not strong enough to argue with you,' returned Queen Mab. 'You may be right, but I do not think so. How I can ever repay you for all you have done for me, I know not ; but it would be an act of base ingratitude were I to marry you without giving you the love you deserve, and which I wish from my soul I could give you.'

'Enough,' replied Sir Ronald firmly. 'I have nothing more to urge. When you are convinced of your error and find yourself deserted, perhaps you will recognise your present blindness. When you find yourself alone and miserable, friendless and weary of life, then, Queenie, send for me. We will talk no more on the subject now. Let us

return; Mr. Henderson has a great deal to say to you.'

'Now you are angry,' exclaimed the girl piteously, tears rising to her eyes. 'And I am so unhappy!'

'Angry with you, Queenie!' was the passionate reply. 'How can you even think so? I am grieved for your sake even more than for my own. But if I can be nothing else to you, at all events I can still be of some use. Come, my little pet, let us get home; Henderson will be waiting.'

'Ronald,' resumed Queenie in a subdued voice, as they once more approached the old Hall, 'I want to say one thing more to you. If Lord Darell is all that you say, I shall despise him; and then, perhaps—in time—I might grow to love *you*. But as yet I am engaged to Reginald, and till he sets me free I must remain so.'

‘We will not talk of that, Queenie,’ returned the Baronet coldly. ‘Much as I love you, I cannot submit to such an alternative. It would ill become me to consent to make a woman my wife simply because Lord Darell did not keep faith with her.’

And feeling deeply humiliated and distressed, Queen Mab silently followed Sir Ronald up the great flight of steps which led to the library window.

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‘My dear Miss Mostyn,’ began the old family agent, rising from his chair when Queenie and Sir Ronald entered the room, ‘I am glad to see you downstairs once more. Thanks to Sir Ronald Estmere, there is very little for you to do. Still I have unpleasant news to communicate, which I hope you will bear bravely—I—’

‘There is nothing that Miss Mostyn has

not heard already,' interrupted Sir Ronald. 'You need not go over the story, Mr. Henderson. Nothing fresh has occurred, I suppose?'

'Pardon me, Sir Ronald,' returned the agent, who of all things hated interruption, 'but there *is* something quite fresh. This morning I received a communication from Messrs. Grabbit and Son—a firm I certainly never had the misfortune to hold dealings with before. They inform me that their client, Mr. Ralph Mostyn, intends coming here the week after next. They will send down servants in ten days. I must say——'

'He cannot do it,' broke in Sir Ronald angrily, noticing the deadly pallor which spread over Queen Mab's face. 'It was on condition that he did not come near the place until after the sale that I advanced him——' and here, with a flush, the Baronet

halted in confusion, and glanced uneasily at the anxious girl beside him.

‘You did so without my advice, Sir Ronald,’ said the man of business sharply. ‘Mr. Mostyn gave you no written agreement; you were foolish to trust him. He intends to come, and we cannot prevent him. Messrs. Grabbit also inform me that their client purposes to put the Hall and entire estate up to auction in the course of three months. Mr. Mostyn never intends to return to England.’

‘I wish he never had returned!’ angrily exclaimed Sir Ronald. ‘What are we to do? the time is so short.’

‘It does not matter, Ronald,’ said Queen Mab gently, as she noticed the angry flush on the young Baronet’s face. ‘I shall have plenty of time to find some little home elsewhere; Mrs. Desmond and nurse will, I know, go with me. Mr. Henderson,’ she



continued, 'what is the entire value of the property I am entitled to—and how soon can you realize it?'

'My valuation of the plate, wines, horses, and carriages comes to about six thousand pounds; that is, if they are *well* sold,' replied the agent. 'Have you any bills, Miss Mostyn? Excuse the question, but it would be as well to settle them.'

'I owe Elise nearly seven hundred pounds,' replied the girl sadly. 'Father was going to pay it for me this Christmas. And I suppose I owe quite another five hundred. You see,' she continued, with a faint smile, 'I always considered myself a little heiress. I gave all my pocket-money away, and never paid for anything.'

'I am afraid you will be very much hampered,' replied Mr. Henderson gravely. 'When your debts are paid you will have barely two hundred and forty pounds a

year—and you have no notion of the value of money. Your uncle will, however, surely allow you——’

‘Enough of this,’ cried Sir Ronald, starting to his feet. ‘Mr. Henderson, I know my mother wishes to see you. Miss Mostyn is not yet strong enough to entertain you at luncheon, and she has asked Lady Estmere to do so for her. I have now some private papers of Mr. Mostyn’s to place before his daughter.’

‘Private papers!’ exclaimed the now excited agent. ‘My dear Sir Ronald, I was not aware of the existence of any! Where did you find them? Surely I should know something of my late client’s affairs. Of course, as sole executor you have every right and every power to search——’

‘I have,’ briefly replied the Baronet, ‘and I have exercised it. Mr. Henderson,

will you join her ladyship at luncheon? I wish to talk to you afterwards about finding a suitable agent for my Northamptonshire property.'

'Certainly, certainly,' replied the flattered agent. 'Shall I see you after luncheon, then, Sir Ronald?'

'Yes, I will send for you;,' and with a gratified look the little man left the room.

'Queenie,' began Sir Ronald, as he gently drew her towards a chair by the fire, 'now you must listen to me. I know,' he continued with a faint smile, leaving her side, and leaning against the mantelpiece, 'that you will dislike what I am going to say, but it is my duty to speak. Your father left you to me as a solemn charge. I promised him in this very room to watch over and guard you, and I intend to keep my word. Listen quietly to what I have

to say, Queen Mab, and then tell me if you see any objection to my plan.'

'Don't, Ronald; please don't talk to me as you did a little while ago!' pleaded the girl, burying her face in her hands. 'Indeed I cannot bear it. I am weak and ill. Indeed I am.'

'What I have to say is this,' resumed the young Baronet. 'You cannot live on what you have left, and you shall not attempt to do so. Leave this place, and come to Estmere. My mother will take care of you; Mrs. Desmond and your old nurse shall come also. A whole wing of the house shall be placed at your disposal, and you shall see whom you like. I will write to-night to Lord Darell and tell him that my house is open to him. I myself shall never trouble you unless you want me. Queenie, you cannot marry Darell for a year at any rate. During that

time Estmere is at your disposal. Treat the place entirely as if it were your own. If, in a year's time,' went on Sir Ronald sadly, 'you still wish to marry Lord Darell, do so. Have no fear for this place and all it contains—I shall buy it. Queenie, the paper I hold in my hand is your father's last will. Besides being his sole executor I am your sole guardian. If *you* doubt me, your *father* trusted me; *he* knew that I would give my soul to make you happy, and you cannot resist the authority he gave me. Never will I abuse his trust by allowing you to live almost in penury. Come to Estmere, and I will treat you as a sister ; and if you prefer it, no one need know that in the eyes of the law I am your guardian. But if you refuse I will save you in spite of yourself, and compel you, as my ward, to live with my mother. Now, Queen Mab, take your choice.'

‘But, Ronald, what will Lady Estmere say?’ faltered the girl.

‘What she likes,’ replied Sir Ronald. ‘Estmere is mine. But indeed she loves you, Queenie, and you need never clash. The western wing shall be yours alone.’

‘And may I really take Mrs. Desmond, nurse, and my colleys with me?’ timidly asked the bewildered girl. ‘And may Lord Darell come to see me?’

‘Certainly,’ Sir Ronald answered. ‘I have told you that the western wing of the house shall be all your own. Lord Darell will be welcome to my house, the best my cellar can afford, my stables, my covers—to everything I have, indeed, except my honour; and that I would prefer to keep in my own hands.’

‘Thank you, Ronald,’ said Queenie softly, putting her hand in his. ‘If I were heiress to a principality, you could not be more

indulgent to me. I am afraid I but ill repay it. May I go now? I am so tired.'

'Yes, go and rest, Queenie; this has been a trying morning for you. I think we had better leave for Estmere the day after tomorrow. All the horses and carriages which are yours shall be sent on; you will then have your old favourites about you.'

'Thank you,' replied Queen Mab; 'I cannot express my gratitude; but, Ronald, I *do* thank you from the bottom of my heart.'



## CHAPTER XV.



WITH all his cold calculating forethought, Lord Darell had never been more taken aback in his life.

Sitting in the breakfast-room where we first saw him, with an open letter in his hand, he looked gloomy and angry in the extreme.

The bright blue sky, with a wintry sun shining on the white untrodden snow, made an admirable picture. The vast park, its forest glades silvered with frost, extended before his windows like some scene in a fairy landscape. But no natural beauties



served to distract him from his moody and selfish thoughts.

‘The girl must be mad!’ he muttered, as once again he read the letter in his hand. ‘Mostyn not hers! gone to live at Estmere! what does it all mean? Marry her? Of course I cannot marry a pauper, as she now seems to be. She must be insane to dream of it. Ronald Estmere may—I will not. But stay,’ he continued, as a sudden thought flashed across him. ‘Estmere *is* a fool; none but a fool madly in love would do what he has done. I shall not marry Queenie, but I can make them both believe that I will. Then, when Ronald thinks I am in earnest, I can turn magnanimous and offer to give her up—explain to him that really, much as I love her, I cannot ask her to share such a reckless life as mine. If I know anything of Estmere he will be delighted, and perhaps, if I manage properly,

return all that devilish paper he holds. It is a bad job, but I must make the best of it. I suppose,' he continued, as he lit a cigarette, 'I had better ride over to Estmere. I hate the place, and I know Lady Estmere hates me. But as Queenie is there, and seems to think I ought to go—well, I suppose I must;' and Lord Darell reluctantly rang the bell and ordered a hack.

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'Ronald!' said Lady Estmere, in a rather solemn, pompous tone of voice, which that worthy lady sometimes assumed, 'I wish to talk to you seriously. May I beg you to spare me half an hour of your valuable time.'

It was about three days after their return to Estmere, and Sir Ronald was busy in his cosy little study adding up various account-books which his steward had brought for his inspection.

‘Certainly, mother,’ he answered courteously, though a look of annoyance clouded his handsome face. ‘But I have promised Queenie to take her round the stables at twelve ; one of her greys is lame, and——’

‘Those greys ought never to have come here,’ replied the old lady coldly. ‘Ronald, may I ask what you intend to do ? Of course,’ she continued in an aggrieved tone, as she seated herself near the desk, ‘I always expected to become a nonentity in this place when you married ; but so long as I am mistress here, I will not allow things to go on as they are doing now. I have no objection to Miss Mostyn’s occupying the whole of the western wing. Long ago I made up my mind that you would some day marry her. Shocked and grieved as I felt when I became aware of her great social change, still I would gladly have received her as my daughter. Happily

you stood in no need of the Mostyn acres, and I would have welcomed Queenie for her own sake and for yours. But yesterday,' added Lady Estmere, with a contemptuous smile, 'Miss Mostyn informed me that Lord Darell was coming here this afternoon! Ronald, I repeat that though she is penniless, I have no objection to Queenie's living here as your future wife; I have no objection to her horses, grooms, and servants remaining here, though she must be aware that the cost of maintaining them falls on you. To all this, I tell you, I have no objection, if she means ultimately to marry you. But that you should be made a mere cat's-paw—that you should suffer as I see you do, and that Queenie should dare ask that reprobate Lord Darell to Estmere is quite intolerable. I said nothing to *her*,' went on Lady Estmere proudly. 'She is a mere child, not yet eighteen. To you, how-

ever, I say this—if Lord Darell enters Estmere, I leave it. Queenie cannot then remain here, and far better that she should not. Let her find friends elsewhere.’

‘You are mistaken, mother,’ sadly returned Sir Ronald. ‘Do not make my position more difficult than it is at present. Queenie will not promise to be my wife—no power will make her. It is beneath us both to resort to petty tyranny. Remember, she is here as my ward ; I explained to you the contents of the poor old Squire’s will. Let things go on as they are. Darell, I am afraid, will never marry Queenie. I say I am afraid, because, poor child, I believe his desertion will almost break her heart. As her guardian, I shall *insist* on an explanation from Lord Darell—he shall tell me plainly what he means to do. Mother, I have never yet asked you a favour in my life—I do so now. Stay here and look

after Queen Mab. As you say, she *is* only a child, and a very wayward one. In time I believe she will come to her senses. Will you bear with her for my sake ?

‘If you really wish it so strongly of course I will, Ronald,’ replied Lady Estmere, in a softened tone. ‘But it will go very much against the grain with me to be even polite to Lord Darell. Ronald, is it true that you intend purchasing the entire Mostyn estate when it is put up to auction ?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Baronet cheerfully. ‘You see, mother, it lies close to us ; the property is a splendid one, and it will make me’—artfully working on his mother’s weak point—‘the most powerful landlord in the county.’

The old lady smiled.

‘It will cost you nearly a quarter of a million, Ronald,’ she observed, with some

hesitation. 'But I agree with you that it is very tempting. And then you will get nearly three per cent. on your outlay. But still it is a very large sum of money, my dear boy. If you should require any help, you know I have a fortune of my own. Some day, Ronald, it will all be yours,' she added fondly, 'and for such a purpose I would gladly give it to you in advance.'

'You certainly are the most unselfish of mothers,' replied the young Baronet tenderly. 'But I should not require it. 'If Queenie marries Darell,' he muttered to himself, 'she shall still have her old home; but not for worlds would I let that spend-thrift expect such a thing. If he marries her, he shall believe he is wedding a pauper; and *if* he does so, I will confess I have bitterly wronged him.'

'Ah, well! I shall leave you now; here is Queenie,' said Lady Estmere good-

naturedly. 'Good-morning, my dear! I do trust you find everything comfortable.'

'You are both far too kind,' replied the girl in a low voice, as she affectionately returned the old lady's kiss. 'Ronald said he would take me over his stables—I did not know that he was engaged with you, Lady Estmere.'

'Nor am I now,' replied Sir Ronald, as Lady Estmere left the room. 'We had a little business to arrange, but we have quite finished. My cap and gloves are in the hall. Come, Queenie!' he went on hastily, as he noticed that his companion's eyes were fixed on his writing-table, where lay a printed paper containing all particulars of the approaching sale of Mostyn Hall.

'Ronald,' exclaimed the girl, bursting into a flood of passionate tears, 'it will break my heart to see anyone else in my



old home! I could make any sacrifice to keep it—I—I think I could even give up Reginald!’

Loving her as he did, and perfectly understanding all that her broken words conveyed, the intense desire of Sir Ronald to take her in his arms and claim her as his own was difficult, almost impossible to overcome. For one moment he wavered, then, with a melancholy smile, he turned towards the window.

‘Queenie,’ he began presently, his generally clear voice trembling with emotion—‘Queen Mab, much as I love you, I would rather never see your face again than make you my wife on such terms. I must have all your love, or none at all. Queenie,’ he continued, ‘I love you so well that I am going now to trust you with a secret unknown to any save myself. Lord Darell wishes to marry you—or rather, he said

that he did, when the world believed you to be the heiress of Mostyn. Time will prove whether he sought you for yourself, or for your once great prospects. I am buying Mostyn Hall for *you*, Queenie; whoever you marry, your old home shall still be your own. On your wedding-day I will settle it on you. But, Queen Mab, you must promise to tell no one of this. Let us see if Darell loves you well enough to make you his wife, believing that you are portionless. If he does, he will be worthy of you, and Mostyn shall be yours—and his. Promise me, Queen Mab, to keep my secret—*that*, at least, I may claim from you.'

'I always knew you to be nobly generous, Ronald,' said the girl, as she looked with an expression almost of awe into her companion's face; 'and I know that all you say you mean, and of course I shall keep your secret sacred. But, believe me, I

should never accept such a gift. Rich though you are, I know that such a sacrifice would cripple you for ever, and *you* must know that I should decline such a princely gift.'

'You could not help yourself, Queen Mab! If I chose to settle Mostyn upon you it would be yours, whether you consented to accept it or not. You could hardly allow your tenants to keep their rents themselves? I am the last of my race—I shall never marry—and my income is far beyond my needs. Even supposing that I sacrificed twelve thousand a year, I should still have more than enough.'

'I wish I had never seen Lord Darell!' murmured Queenie, in a trembling voice. 'He is not good like you—he cannot be, for I know he is selfish; but I do love him, Ronald—and indeed he loves me.'

'Then if such be the case it would be

a foul shame to part you; but will your love always last, Queenie? You are only seventeen, and he, as you know, is notorious for inconstancy. He is coming here to-day, is he not?’

‘Yes, very soon—it is past twelve now,’ replied Queenie, with some hesitation. ‘Ronald, you will make him welcome, will you not?’

‘This is my house, and I hope I am a gentleman,’ he answered somewhat coldly. ‘Shall we go to the stables now? We can walk down the southern drive and meet him.’

‘Did you find any money in my father’s desk?’ asked Queen Mab timidly, as they turned into the great stable-yard. ‘You see, Mrs. Desmond’s half-year’s salary is due, and nurse——’

‘God bless my soul, how unpardonably forgetful I am!’ replied Sir Ronald. ‘Yes,

Queenie, I found a little—about two hundred and forty pounds. And there was a balance at the County Bank of seven hundred odd; the London account was overdrawn.’ (How much, Sir Ronald did not mention.) ‘Then there is about three thousand pounds due to you for plate and wines. I had better pay the lot into the County Bank, Queenie, and give you a cheque-book.’

‘What shall I have a year?’ went on the girl nervously. ‘Do tell me, Ronald, because I know I must be careful. And I see you have brought seven of my horses here, and four grooms. Two will be enough for me—I ought not to afford more. And one man could look after——’

‘Shut up, Queenie!’ laughed the Baronet. ‘Oh child!’ he went on earnestly, ‘do not worry your head about such trifles. There are over sixty horses standing in

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my stables now ; your seven can make no earthly difference. The few thousands you have you may as well spend. If you marry Darell, they would be of no use to him. It was stupid of me to forget, but indeed I never gave the matter a thought. In a few days you will have some four thousand pounds in the County Bank, and I will give you a cheque-book to-night. Come and see my new chestnut team,' he continued lightly, 'and then, if you like, we can walk down to the southern approach and meet Lord Darell.'



## CHAPTER XVI.

‘**L**ONDON in a frost is simply unbearable!’ exclaimed Lord Highworth, descending from his cab opposite the doors of the Racing Club, slipping on the icy pavement and nearly measuring his length in the street. ‘Why don’t you put sand down?’ he went on irritably, as the hall porter hastily pushed the swinging-doors together to exclude the cold sharp air. ‘Anyone in the club? Or is the house a desert as usual?’

‘I think the club is pretty full, my lord,’ replied the man, helping the Earl

to struggle out of his great fur coat. 'Good many gentlemen up from the shires, my lord ; frozen out, I believe. There are certainly over twenty come in since three o'clock.'

'Just come in time, Highworth, to give us the benefit of your opinion !' exclaimed Sir Frewen Hepburn, as the old Earl entered the large room overlooking Piccadilly, and took up his position in the bow-window, from which he looked critically on the passing throng. 'We have all nearly quarrelled about the merits of this new American, who has dropped among us like a golden meteor. Do you call her lovely or not ? Gad ! you ought to be a judge ! Who will carry off this priceless treasure ? I see by the papers that she and her father dined with her ladyship and you last night.'

'Miss Fortescue, I suppose you mean,'



replied Lord Highworth somewhat acridly, as he walked towards the fireplace. 'Ah, Hepburn ! you don't want the opinion of an old man like myself. Lovely ! well, that is rather a strong term ; she certainly is pretty—deuced pretty ! Her father is hardly what I should call well bred ; but then he is as wealthy as the Rothschilds, and therefore of course he is the rage. They say he will give his daughter two millions. A good look-out for some needy peer. If you ask *me* who will carry off the gold mine, I should say our young friend Darell has pretty nearly a stone in hand ; at any rate he has been making the running pretty hot.'

'The more reason why he should not stay home,' spitefully broke in young Lord Danebury, who, besides being rather in love with the beautiful American, had also an eye to her large fortune. 'Darell ! why,

I thought he was publicly engaged to that little Miss Mostyn, the one everyone believed to be an heiress, but who has come down to living on the bounty of Ronald Estmere. I sec,' he went on lightly, 'that two letters from her are in the hall for Darell. I know they are hers, because Estmere Abbey is on the backs of the envelopes. They lay across a couple of my own, so I could not help seeing them. What idiots women are to write to a man on their own embossed paper !'

'Wisdom such as you possess, Lord Danebury, is not generally to be found in the minds of innocent, trusting girls like Miss Mostyn,' sarcastically replied Lord Highworth, who, though a thorough reprobate, had never been known to breathe a word against a woman in his life. 'I knew poor old Mostyn well,' he continued; 'a better man. a truer friend never breathed.

His daughter is, to my mind, one of the most perfect and beautiful women in creation. As you openly assert that she is engaged to Darell, may I ask what harm there can be in her writing to him upon any paper that she chooses to use ?

‘Why, none, I suppose !’ angrily retorted the other. ‘It was you, Lord Highworth, who just now stated that Darell would probably marry Miss Fortescue. It seems strange to me, and to others also, that Miss Mostyn should live in the home of a man who is well known to be devoted to her, and yet be engaged to Lord Darell. It seems stranger still that she should permit Ronald Estmere to be recognised as the future purchaser of Mostyn Hall. And you can contradict it if you like, Highworth, but is it not a fact that Lord Darell is making fierce love to Cecile Fortescue ?’

‘For all I know, Darell may be the greatest

of scamps,' replied the old Earl sternly; 'but that has nothing to do with Margaret Mostyn. I am old enough to be your father, Lord Danebury; and I beg you not to speak of that girl in my presence as you would not dare to speak before Sir Ronald Estmere.'

'Dare!' retorted Lord Danebury. 'What I say, allow me to tell you, I should *dare* to say before any man. Ronald Estmere! what do I care for him? He——'

'Is one of the best swordsmen in England—one of the most renowned shots in Europe,' quietly answered the Earl; 'one of the most perfect gentlemen I ever met. Enough of this, Lord Danebury,' he went on hastily; 'here comes Ronald Estmere.'

'Shut up, Danebury!' savagely interposed Sir Frewen Hepburn. 'Gad! man, be quiet, can't you? Are you drunk?'

'Having been defied, I shall say what I

like,' furiously returned Danebury, 'and I care not who hears me. You are welcome to your opinion ; I retain my own. And in my opinion Miss Mostyn is playing a game between Lord Darell and Sir Ronald Estmere. I also say——'

'Lord Danebury, may I speak to you in the next room?' interposed Sir Ronald Estmere quietly, though his white face and flashing eyes showed that his calmness was only assumed. 'I shall not detain you more than a few moments. Do not trouble yourself, Hepburn,' he went on coldly ; 'there will be no row. I simply wish to say two or three words to Lord Danebury.'

'Of course I will come,' said Lord Danebury fiercely ; 'though what all this confounded fuss is about passes my comprehension. I have only repeated what the whole world says and believes.'

‘That is why I wish to put a stop to such absurd rumours,’ icily returned Sir Ronald. ‘Lord Danebury, I shall not keep you five minutes.’

‘Should not wonder if there is a row after all,’ murmured Lord Gordon Cheyne, as he lit a cigarette. ‘That fellow Danebury is as hot as a peppercorn. I think, Hepburn, one of us ought to go and stop it. It will give the club a bad name if there is a serious quarrel.’

‘I shall not interfere,’ returned Sir Frewen. ‘And no more shall you, Gordon,’ he continued, as the young man moved towards the door. ‘Leave them alone. Estmere is far too proud to come to blows like a butcher-boy. Am I not right, Lord Highworth?’

‘Perfectly,’ replied the old Earl. ‘Take my advice, Gordon, and don’t interfere. That fellow Danebury is a bad man to have

for an enemy ; his tongue is the most vicious in London. No woman ever seems to be able to escape his slander. I hope — I sincerely hope that Ronald Estmere will give him a good setting-down ; he badly needs it.'

'Well, I don't care if they pull the whole house about their ears,' serenely replied Lord Gordon Cheyne. 'But I think it is a great pity duelling has gone out of date. Fellows seem to be able to say and do whatever they like. I don't think Danebury is so bad as he is painted, however. He is really in love with Miss Fortescue, and of course feels cut up that Darell, who is almost openly engaged to Miss Mostyn, should carry on such a very strong flirtation with the other girl.'

'Darell flirts with every pretty woman,' returned Lord Highworth. 'I fancy——' but his further remarks were cut short,

as Lord Danebury abruptly entered the room.

‘Lord Highworth,’ he commenced slowly, as he walked towards the fireplace, ‘I am sincerely sorry for what I said a short time ago. I was wrong; Ronald Estmere has convinced me of my error. I hope you understand this as I mean it. I wish to retract every word I said about Miss Mostyn. As for Lord Darell,’ he went on, with rising colour, ‘I consider him a blackguard, and anyone who likes is at liberty to tell him that I say so!’ and without another word Lord Danebury turned upon his heel and left the room.

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‘I’ll put a stop to all this infernal nonsense!’ muttered Sir Ronald Estmere, turning into Piccadilly and walking in the direction of Lord Darell’s house in Grosvenor Street. ‘It is my duty to do



so; I will not have Queenie talked about. Darell comes twice a week to Estmere, and simply lies to the child; and while in London he passes most of his time with this new American heiress. There are two of Queenie's letters lying unopened in the Racing Club for him, though he has been there every night. I will see him at once, and he shall give me an explanation of his conduct, or come no more to Estmere.'

Turning into Grosvenor Street, Sir Ronald slightly moderated his rapid pace. His task was indeed a difficult one. To forbid Lord Darell his house was easy enough; but what capital would not the unprincipled young Earl make out of such an act? To speak to Queenie the young Baronet knew was worse than useless. She invariably took Lord Darell's part. Had not Sir Ronald honestly loved the girl for her own sake, he would long ago have left

Queen Mab entirely to her own devices. Such a course would speedily have brought the girl to her senses ; but from this method of procedure his warm heart recoiled. How could he, loving Queenie as he did, permit her to leave Estmere, and endure the fearful, and to her unknown, trials of poverty ? If he could have done so, the whole state of things would very soon have been altered. Lord Darell had a horror of poverty, and everything connected with it. Queenie at Estmere, and Queenie in a cottage, not knowing how to pay her weekly bills, would have been two very different persons in his eyes. The Earl was only waiting until after the Derby to make up his mind. Should his filly win, he would pocket a stake sufficient to free him almost entirely. Should his mare be beaten, he stood to lose a fearful sum.

Before he met Miss Fortescue, he had

almost determined, should he win the Derby, to marry Queen Mab. But now he had modified his plans. Miss Fortescue would have more than a million, and Lord Darell intended to use every art to win her. This had been so far tolerably easy. No woman had been known to resist Lord Darell, and the pretty American had proved no exception to the rule. Come what might, the Earl had made up his mind, going even so far as to ask Miss Fortescue and her father to visit him at Heron Castle, an offer which Mr. Fortescue had gladly accepted, at the same time telling Lord Darell that personally he liked him better than any Englishman he had ever seen.

Heron Castle, one of the most lovely of England's many beautiful country seats, Lord Darell felt confident would put the finishing-touch to the favourable impression already made on the American, and he

had accordingly given orders that the Castle should be made ready in a fortnight's time to receive himself and his guests as the Earls of Darell, even in their wealthiest days, had never been received there.

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'Is Lord Darell in?' asked Sir Ronald Estmere of a portly butler, supported by two footmen with powdered heads and gorgeous liveries. 'I wish to see him,' he continued haughtily, as the man hesitated.

'His lordship *is* in, Sir Ronald,' replied the butler respectfully. 'His lordship, however, gave orders that he was at home to no one ; but perhaps he would see you, Sir Ronald,' he went on vaguely, as though he was hardly prepared to refuse admittance to the greatest landowner in his master's county. 'Shall I ask his lordship, Sir Ronald?'

'You need not trouble yourself, Holford,'

said Sir Ronald. 'Lord Darell is in his study? Good, I will find him there;' and without listening to the man's confused remonstrances, he moved towards the door.

'I told you, Holford, I was not to be disturbed,' began Lord Darell angrily, as his door opened. 'I really—— Hullo! Estmere, is it you? I am always glad to see *you*,' he continued mendaciously. 'When did you come to town? too late to offer you luncheon, but have a glass of port, sherry, or a brandy and soda.'

'Thank you, Darell, I am not thirsty,' replied Sir Ronald coldly. 'I have come to talk to you on a matter of business. I am sorry if I have disturbed you.'

'I hate business,' laughingly returned the Earl. ('Come about that beastly paper of mine, I suppose,' he continued to himself.) 'Well, if you are not thirsty, I am—'

I have been studying this last speech of Lord C——'s, and it is the driest thing I ever came across. Holford, send Alexis here, and tell Saunders to bring some brandy and soda.'

'I wish to talk to you privately, Darell,' resumed Sir Ronald when the Greek page made his appearance. 'Will you give me half an hour?'

'An hour if you like—why not stop and dine?' cheerfully answered the Earl. 'Alexis, take these letters and bring me the answers; the one marked number four you will deliver in person. That will do, Saunders; put the tray down—I can help myself. Now, Estmere,' he continued, as the servants left the room, 'what is it? I am ready to listen to you.'

'I hate beating about the bush, and I shall come to the point at once, Darell,' said Sir Ronald, placing his back to the

fire, drawing himself to his full height, and looking searchingly into his companion's face. 'What I wish to know is this—and I intend that you shall give me a clear answer—do you mean to marry Miss Mostyn, or do you not? If you do, why does everyone connect your name with Miss Fortescue's? I really fail to understand——'

'And I really fail to recognise your right to question me,' abruptly broke in Lord Darell. 'What business is it of yours? The fact that Miss Mostyn honours you by staying at Estmere gives you no right to control her actions. You are not her brother. In fact,' he went on more coolly, 'I always considered you her lover. And if you suppose that the small pecuniary obligation I am under warrants your dictating to me, allow me to tell you that you are mistaken. You can have the money at

a day's notice. But if you interfere between Queenie and me, you will get yourself into a mess.'

'I don't think I shall,' coolly replied the Baronet. 'I think, Darell, that if you play the fool with me, you will find the boot on the other leg. It so happens that under Mr. Mostyn's last will I am his child's guardian. She stops in my house as my ward. As to money matters, you are perhaps unaware that I have purchased the whole of your large debt to Messrs. Abraham and Son. You will find what I say is correct,' he continued, with a sarcastic smile, as he met the Earl's amazed look. 'You yourself best know when that loan falls due. Abraham and Son were very glad to part with it. I have never done an ungentlemanly action in my life; but I warn you that if you think you are going to play fast and loose with Queenie, you



are mistaken. If you mean to marry her tell her so, and let the world know it. If you do, you will find me a very lenient creditor. Go on as you are now doing, and by heaven, Darell, I will ruin you with one stroke of my pen! If you prefer Miss Fortescue and her money to my ward, say so, and even then I will not be hard upon you; but unless you take a decided course, I tell you plainly that while you are entertaining your guests at Heron, I will send the bailiffs into your Castle as companions for your assembled friends.'

'You dare not do it!' angrily exclaimed Lord Darell. 'Abraham had no right to part with my paper; you take a false advantage of your wealth, Sir Ronald, to do what you have done.'

'As for daring—the word has no place in my vocabulary. What I have said I will

most certainly do. Do you imagine that I will allow you to treat Miss Mostyn as you have treated too many others? If you mean to marry her, say so. If you prefer Miss Fortescue, say so. Queenie, I trust, is too proud to break her heart for *you*. But one way or the other you shall decide. I consider my post of guardian by far too sacred a trust to allow you to go on as you are now doing. Your conduct has become the talk of London, and I tell you plainly I will not permit it.'

'I will come to Estmere very shortly,' replied Lord Darell, 'and give my answer in person to Miss Mostyn. Meanwhile, you are at perfect liberty to tell her all that has passed between us. Do you know,' he continued, with a savage look, 'that I have killed a man for saying less to me than you have said to-day?'

‘So I have been told,’ coolly answered Sir Ronald. ‘But for your own sake, Lord Darell, I would caution you against attempting such a course with me. Well informed as you are, you must be aware that the odds with either pistol or rapier would be against you. But I did not come here to talk this sort of nonsense. I shall rely on seeing you at Estmere before long. I think that is all I have to say, save that I hold some six thousand pounds belonging to Miss Mostyn. Should you marry her, I shall see that it is tied up tightly. Good-day.’

‘Six thousand pounds!’ muttered the Earl, his face dark with suppressed passion. ‘And is that all the former heiress of Mostyn has? Certainly I *should* be a fool if I married her—except for revenge, and revenge is not worth the sacrifice. No; I will repay Ronald Estmere in his own coin.

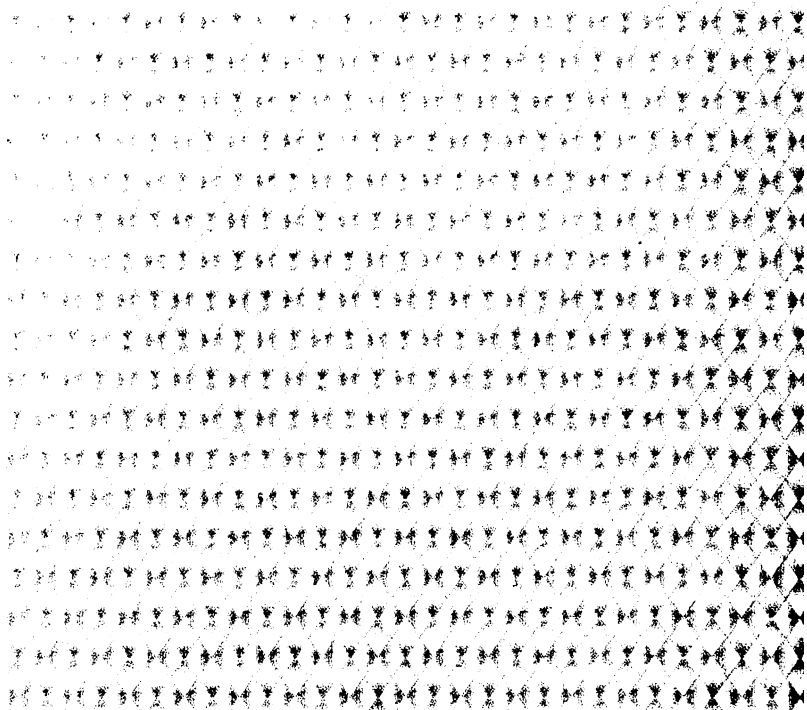
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I certainly shall not marry Queenie, but no more shall he. It will not be hard to prejudice her against him. Time will show which of us has really had the best of this interview.'

END OF VOL. I.







1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for ensuring the integrity and transparency of financial data. This section also outlines the various methods used to collect and analyze data, highlighting the need for consistency and reliability in the information gathered.

2. The second part of the document focuses on the challenges faced by organizations in managing their financial resources effectively. It identifies key areas such as budgeting, forecasting, and risk management, and provides detailed insights into the strategies employed to address these challenges. The text also discusses the role of technology in enhancing financial management processes and the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation.

3. The third part of the document explores the impact of external factors on financial performance. It examines how market conditions, regulatory changes, and economic trends can influence an organization's financial health. This section also discusses the importance of staying informed about these external factors and adapting strategies accordingly to maintain financial stability and growth.

4. The fourth part of the document provides a comprehensive overview of the financial reporting process. It details the various types of financial statements, including the balance sheet, income statement, and cash flow statement, and explains how they are prepared and audited. This section also discusses the importance of transparency and accountability in financial reporting and the role of external auditors in ensuring the accuracy of the data presented.

5. The fifth part of the document discusses the importance of financial planning and budgeting. It outlines the steps involved in developing a budget, from identifying goals and objectives to allocating resources and monitoring progress. This section also discusses the importance of flexibility in budgeting and the need to adjust plans as circumstances change to ensure the organization remains on track to achieve its financial goals.

6. The sixth part of the document focuses on the importance of financial control and internal auditing. It discusses the various methods used to monitor and control financial activities, including the use of internal controls and the role of internal auditors. This section also discusses the importance of maintaining a strong internal control system to prevent fraud and ensure the accuracy of financial data.

7. The seventh part of the document discusses the importance of financial communication and reporting. It outlines the various channels used to communicate financial information, including financial statements, press releases, and investor presentations. This section also discusses the importance of providing clear and concise information to stakeholders and the role of financial communication in building trust and confidence in the organization.

8. The eighth part of the document provides a summary of the key findings and conclusions of the study. It reiterates the importance of maintaining accurate records, managing financial resources effectively, and staying informed about external factors. This section also discusses the implications of the findings for future research and the need for continued efforts to improve financial management practices.

9. The ninth part of the document discusses the importance of financial education and training. It outlines the various programs and initiatives used to educate employees and management on financial matters, including workshops, seminars, and online courses. This section also discusses the importance of providing ongoing training and support to ensure that all staff members are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage financial resources effectively.

10. The tenth part of the document provides a final summary and conclusion. It reiterates the key findings and conclusions of the study and emphasizes the importance of financial management in ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of an organization. This section also discusses the need for continued research and innovation in financial management practices to address the challenges of the future.



